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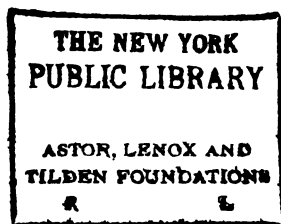
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"Why don't you come to help me in?"

KINGS OF THE MISSOURI

By
HUGH PENDEXTER

Author of
Red Belts, Gentlemen of the North, etc.

Illustrated by
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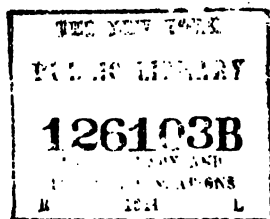
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To
That Good Friend of Mine
HELEN
My Dear Wife
This Book Is Affectionately Dedicated

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KINGS OF THE MISSOURI

CHAPTER I

SWEETHEARTS AND KNIVES

ST. LOUIS with its strange hodge-podge of humanity bustled feverishly under the late April sun. The permanent inhabitants were respectable and progressive, yet the first impression a stranger was apt to receive was an atmosphere of recklessness, if not lawlessness. This because the city with its seven thousand people was the center of the fur trade and the temporary haven for desperate characters from east of the Mississippi. Located a scant score of miles below the mouth of the Missouri—the white man's first path to the Rockies and the key to the trans-Mississippian territory—the city yielded nothing to

Montreal as a jumping-off place for adventures of all sorts.

The explorations of Major Zebulon Pike, Captains^k Lewis and Clark, and Major Stephen H. Long, were from one to two decades old on this particular April day, and yet the people thus far had profited but scantily from the printed reports. There was soon coming a time when a mighty host, impelled by a national impulse to expand, would eagerly consult these sleeping authorities. But St. Louis in 1831 thought and talked of furs, not of peopling a continent. In the streets could be seen the lounging mountain men employed by the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, formed by General William H. Ashley in 1822. The season before these same men, clad in greasy and worn garments of buckskin and buffalo hide, had brought back from the mountains a hundred thousand dollars' worth of beaver. Men of the American Fur Company, the strongest fur organization on the continent with the exception of the Hudson's Bay, were kept at their permanent posts throughout the valley of the Missouri and did not enjoy the license of leave exhibited by Ashley's old men.

Traders also were returning from Santa Fé

with huge profits. Trade with the Southwest, fur-harvesting in the West and Northwest, was the order of the day. There seems to be no record of either trader or trapper seeking wealth beneath the soil. The gold strikes in California, Colorado, Idaho and Montana, were marching down the years but had not yet arrived. Fur was the king of the western country and beaver was the most sought of all fur-bearing animals. Beaver was to continue holding this eminence until 1833 when John Jacob Astor in London would write to his associates in the great A. F. C.—

“It appears they make hats of silk in place of beaver.”

But beaver was readily selling from seven to eight dollars a pound this April day, and Ralph Lander hurrying to his work in the A. F. C. store never dreamed of living to see the price reduced. In 1831 there was every reason to believe the price must go up as the supply dwindled. The Rocky Mountain Fur Company specialized in beaver. The Hudson's Bay Company, cut off from a profitable trade in robes because of portage charges, greedily took all it could get. The A. F. C. on the Missouri and its tributaries traded for all pelts, but made a drive for the dam-build-

ers. So neither Ralph Lander nor any other man in the year 1831 could know what a blow inventive genius was to deal the beaver trade two years hence.

Lander knew changes must take place, but he could vision nothing to prevent him from becoming a mountain man, a king of the Missouri. His ideal was Ashley, the implacable rival of the A. F. C. It was Ashley who brought romance to the fur trade and set a new pace by doing away with fixed posts and by sending large bodies of trappers into the beaver country to trap and trade. With Ashley had been associated such men as William L. and Milton Sublette, whose grandfather is credited with slaying Tecumseh at the battle of the Thames, James P. Beckwourth and James Bridger. The A. F. C., clinging to the traditions and practises of the British companies, was hard put to meet the growing opposition of these celebrated mountain men. Diluted alcohol was being exchanged—contrary to law of the country—for buffalo robes at the rate of a pint for a robe.

Ashley's tactics, followed by his successors, did not pivot on the efficiency of the Indian. His own trappers caught the furs. While the A. F. C. *could easily* retain a monopoly of the robe

trade it found itself worried because of the rich packs taken out of the country by the opposition.

Both the A. F. C. and the opposition were one in not desiring immigration. The opposition, however, was not concerned with any problems of placating and conserving the Indian. One depended for trade on the good-will and efforts of the Indian, the other went in and secured pelts despite the Indian.

Lander was not given to analysis. He knew the steamboat had come to remain a fixture and that the days of the flatboat were over. He knew the keelboat still persisted as a great factor in the upper Missouri trade, but he did not realize it would have followed the flatboat long before his day had not the flimsy structure of the steam craft made steamboat travel hazardous. He worked for the inexorable A. F. C., a huge and smoothly running machine, and he admired the privateering of Ashley's men. He credited the A. F. C. with eliminating British influence in the Indian country. He should have given the credit to the advent of the American steamboat. What neither State, Church, nor Army could effect had been brought about by superstition. The Indian had decided that those who used a "fire canoe" must be more *mighty than* those who did not.

With epochal changes shaping about him Lander's thoughts remained those of youth in spring-time. The most important thing in the world for him to think about was little Susette Parker, only child of gruff "Hurry-Up" Parker, a valuable cog in the A. F. C.'s St. Louis machinery. The girl had been Lander's inspiration and undoing. She had filled him with ambitions and had robbed him of the power to leave the town and join a mountain expedition and prove his worth. Instead of carving out the future her love must demand, he remained slave to the present and continued packing goods for men who were to live the life.

When the opposition came back from the mountains and the A. F. C. headquarters were blue with profanely expressed rage, Lander secretly rejoiced at their good fortune and felt the thrill of youth, lusting for the unusual. Even the pack-mules, skinned from withers to tail from carrying two hundred pounds for two thousand miles, urged him to follow their back trail. Whenever an express came down from Fort Union—best built west of the Mississippi with the possible exception of Bent's on the Arkansas—and told of Indian troubles, especially of the

undying hatred of the Blackfeet for the whites, he burned to take a pack and gun and steal into the hostile country and try his luck.

When self-respect reproached him for his lack of purpose he defended himself by declaring that no sane man would leave a Susette when she urged him to stay. Susette was spoiled into asking for everything she wanted. She wanted Lander and would not listen to his trying his luck in the Indian country. This eased his conscience, although reason told him he might lose her for all time because he was not strong enough to lose her for a season or two.

Sometimes the fantastic optimism of young years prompted him to scheme immediate marriage, to be followed by venturing into the land of fear and fable. His morning greeting from Hurry-Up Parker always quickly dispelled such nonsense. Parker was hard-headed and damnably practical. The caste of the A. F. C. was in his blood; he would never give his girl to an *engagé*. He might marry an Indian woman himself, if he were posted up-country, but no hired hand, a mere laborer, should dare raise his head high enough to glimpse Susette's pert eyes.

Now that the young people's intimacy had

progressed to the exchange of love vows Lander often felt uncomfortable when he paused to wonder what the stern parent would say and do, once he learned the truth. So the affair had made him sly and secretive. His work included the running of many errands and frequently he was sent to the Parker home on Pine Street. Other times he made errands there when he knew Parker was not about. Only Susette and himself were in the secret, and yet there was one man in the store who had taken to staring at him laughingly every time he came back from an errand.

"I've got to strike out," he groaned half aloud as he slowed his steps on nearing the big warehouse and store. "That Malcom Phinny looks too knowing. He'll be telling things before Susette and I are ready. I must get up-river and work up to some position. No more putting off. I must."

He had said this before. He was very serious now, and yet the sight of a familiar figure approaching made him smile and forget love and old Parker. It was Jim Bridger, head partner now in the Rocky Mountain Fur Company. He stood better than six feet, raw-boned and straight and of powerful frame. His brown hair was very

thick and worn to his shoulders, and his gray eyes were forever taking inventories as he swung his head from side to side. Lander smiled at recollecting some tall stories Bridger was fond of telling.

"Getting ready to go out, Mister Bridger?" politely asked Lander as Bridger shot him a sharp glance and nodded curtly.

"Lander of the 'A. F. C.? I remember you. Your people would mighty well like to put a snag in my way."

"I wouldn't. I always wish you luck," was the honest reply.

Bridger smiled good-naturedly.

"Then I don't mind saying we're gitting away almost at once. An' a young, strapping feller like you oughter be doing something better'n sticking round this place an' standing behind a counter. Why don't you git Parker to send you up-country where you can show your mettle?"

Lander was almost inclined to resent the tone and question, for Bridger was only twenty-seven years old and not much his senior. Bridger, however, spoke as a man of vast experience talking to a child.

"I'd mighty well like to see that Yellowstone country you talk about," said Lander.

"Fools round here think I'm making it up," snorted Bridger. "But I've seen all I've told about. Hot water spouting seventy feet high. Springs of water so hot you can cook meat in 'em. 'An' a cave where the Injuns git their vermilion."

Lander believed he was evening up the mountaineer's air of superiority, and he solemnly repeated:

"I'd mighty well like to see those sights."

"You never will by sticking round here."

And with a jerk of his head the discoverer of Bridger's Pass, of South Pass and the Great Salt Lake, passed on his way.

Lander resumed his smile, then upbraided himself. He never would possess the wealth at twenty-seven that Bridger did. And no number of years could bring him Bridger's influence and power. The man might tell some whopping big lies about the Yellowstone country, but the fact remained that he had more intimate knowledge about the Rocky Mountains than any man of his day. As a guide and reader of signs he was superb. He was held in high esteem by the Indians. Best of all he had worked up from

extreme poverty. All St. Louis knew how he and his sister were left orphans when he was but ten years old, and how at that tender age he had bought a ferryboat and supported the two.

"If he wanted to marry a girl like Susette I reckon Hurry-Up Parker would feel mighty proud," gloomily concluded Lander.

Then he became objective and hastily studied the big storehouse. He was late and Hurry-Up Parker would never forgive tardiness. But from what Susette had said the evening before he knew Parker was entertaining the Fort Union bourgeois, and this would mean an all-night affair with many drinks. Therefore Parker would not show up until late afternoon.

He sidled up to the big doorway and ducked in. The first man he saw was Parker, his face screwed up most savagely. Lander wondered how so vicious-looking a man could be the father of the perfect Susette. He felt deeply embarrassed and not a little uneasy as Parker continued glaring at him over a bale of goods.

Hurrying to the end of the store, where lay his tasks, he met Malcom Phinny, a heavily built, dark-faced fellow, handsome in an Indian sort of a way and several years his senior. Phinny had

worked a season at Cabanne's Post and had brought down the trade of the Pawnees on the Loup Fork of the Platte. He was working for promotion and was scheduled to get it this season. He gave himself airs accordingly and, having witnessed Lander's tardy arrival and the boss' irritation, he took pains to raise his voice to inform:

"Didn't know as you'd be here, Lander, so I finished sorting out the beads and small stuff for you."

"Thanks for nothing," growled Lander.

"What did you do to make a night of it?" chuckled Phinny.

"Oh, shut up!"

Phinny's dark face flushed although he continued to smile.

"I beg your pardon. I should not question my betters. After the wedding and after you've been taken in partner, I hope you'll find room for me somewhere."

Lander turned in fury, then rocked back on his heels to find himself confronting Parker. The latter's unexpected appearance from behind a pile of blankets also had a strong effect on Phinny, who glided toward the other end of the store.

"What did he mean about weddings and being

partner?" demanded Parker, his eyes two black streaks between his lowered lids.

"Lord, sir! I don't know. Just some of his beastly nonsense," replied Lander.

"But if nonsense why should it make you mad? You planning to get married?"

"Good land—no, sir! That is—I'm in no position to get married."

"I should say not! You were up to my house yesterday?"

"I—I was so bold as to drop in during the evening," faltered Lander.

"You were so bold, eh? Remember this—don't be so bold again. When I want you there I'll make an errand and send some one else. You remember you're nothing but a scrub of hired help, an *engagé*, a man who does the odds and ends. Out of hours your range is down on the water-front until you've shown you've got some guts. You come swelling in here half an hour late as if you was one of the company. That won't go with Hurry-Up Parker again. Now git your nose to your work and keep it there."

He was Susette's father. Lander believed Susette loved him. And her father could talk to him like this! He turned red, then white, and

assailed his task to keep his thoughts from murder. He could feel Parker's hard eyes boring into the nape of his neck. It seemed as if he worked an hour with the boss' gaze malignantly following his every move.

At last he heard Parker's steps receding. He twisted his head and caught a glimpse of Phinny, half doubled with merriment behind a pyramid of whisky casks. Lander's heart ached with hate of the man. Parker had some excuse—he had been drinking all night and he was the father of the incomparable Susette. It was his nasty way to be always nagging the men. He gloried in his nickname. But Phinny was free to be hated. He was ever trying to lift himself by stepping on the necks of his mates. Many of the men were convinced he carried tales to Parker.

"What made him think I was up at the house last evening?" Lander asked himself as he slowed up his work and rested a hand on a trade-ax and was tempted to hurl it at the grinning face. "Phinny knew somehow that I was there and he let it drop this morning. Curse him! He's got all the ways of a Red River half-breed."

For the rest of the morning Phinny kept out of his way. When it was near the noon hour Lan-

der saw the men near the door bustling to one side, bowing and scraping in an extravagant manner. Twice before Susette had come to the store, and her arrival had been greeted by just such clumsy attempts to do homage to the pretty daughter of a domineering boss. Ordinarily Lander would have marked it a red-letter day and been filled with joy; now he glanced uneasily toward the door marked "Office" and prayed Parker might not emerge.

Then came a flutter of youth and beauty and Miss Susette was standing inside the door, her skirts pulled aside to escape contamination from a small mountain of whisky casks destined to be smuggled by Fort Leavenworth for the Sioux and Assiniboin trade. Lander hoped she would pass into the office.

She spied him and with a little cry of discovery came tripping down the lane formed by the heaped-up trade goods and supplies.

"Why didn't you come to help me in?" she sternly rebuked. "Two of the men had to lift me up."

"Not a hard job for one man," he said, grinning ruefully at her slight, dainty figure and again marveling how the old bear could be her

father. "If you want to see your father he is in the office."

"I don't want to see him," she coolly informed. "I saw him this morning and he was very cross. Can't you come outside where we can talk? This place smells so of things."

"Susette, I don't dare budge. I was late. Your father mounted me like a wildcat. I can't even talk in here. If you'll walk down by Tradeau's house at eight o'clock this evening I'll have much to tell you."

"Walk by Jean Tradeau's house?" she repeated, much puzzled. "Why not see me at my house?"

"I'll tell you this evening."

"But tell me now!" and a maternal glitter quickened her gaze.

"It's like this——"

He halted and cast an apprehensive glance over his shoulder. Phinny's voice was loudly informing:

"She was here just a minute ago, Mister Parker. I thought she was right behind me when I announced her. Now she's gone. No, there she is chatting with Lander."

Lander felt his heart slipping. To get the best

of physical fear was easy enough; one had only to buckle down and come to grips with the cause. But the anticipation of being put to shame before the girl and by her father fairly sickened him. Susette, not understanding in the least, was rather provoked that her father should intrude on the scene. She affected not to see him.

Parker bore down upon them and unceremoniously seized the girl by the arm and without a word led her to the door.

"But, papa, I was talking with Mr. Lander," she indignantly protested.

Ignoring her, Parker called out to a servant and a frightened colored woman bobbed her head in the door, her lips broadly smiling, her eyes wide with fear.

"You, Maime," hoarsely growled Parker. "If your mistress ever comes here again without my telling her to come I'll sell you down-river."

With that he lifted the vision in lace and ribbons down from the high door and turned back to speak with Lander.

Lander had suffered the worst and now stared at his employer sullenly. Parker halted a few feet from him and began:

"So it's true, eh? I couldn't believe it at first.

You're chasing my little gal, eh? I thought it was a lie when he told me——"

"Meaning when that puppy of a Phinny told you," hotly broke in Lander. "I haven't chased your girl. I've known Miss Susette ever since I came to work here two years ago. You've sent me to the house every few days. You knew we met and talked."

"Well, you won't call again. Now git out of here. You're through. You're not only through, but the A. F. C. will see you don't git any work in St. Louis, except it's nigger's work on the levee."

"The A. F. C. may stop me getting work, perhaps. I won't call at your house till you ask me," replied Lander, slipping on his coat and picking up his hat.

"I'll ask you to call when the Missouri flows from the Mississip' into the Rocky Mountains. Git your pay at the office now. I don't want you coming in here again."

"God forbid!" exclaimed Lander, hastening blindly into the office.

When his mind cleared Lander found himself down by the old Chouteau Pond. From the time he left Parker he could remember nothing of hav-

ing procured his pay although he found it in his pocket and right to a penny. He had no recollection of where he had walked or by what route he had come to the pond. He could recall but one thing, and that was Phinny's hoarse bleat of derision as he left the storehouse.

"I have made the breath come hard trying to catch you," spoke up a gentle voice at his elbow.

He turned and his face lighted as he beheld the frail figure of a man with snow-white hair and white mustaches. It was Etienne Clair, an old and very eccentric Frenchman who roomed near him on upper Market Street.

"I'm in a devil of a mess, Papa Clair," he groaned, feeling as free to crave sympathy as if the ancient had been a woman.

"I followed you many streets. I thought you mad. The devil's to pay? Then there must be work for the knife. We will fix it together!" cried Clair, speaking his English with scarcely a trace of accent. "I have lived long on the river and at the foot of the river. I have seen many troubles eased with the knife. But never have I been so glad——"

"The knife will hardly do in this case," morosely broke in Lander.

"Not do?" squealed the Frenchman, his arms and hands violently repudiating such heresy. "Have I not taught you the etiquette of the knife? Is there a young blood in St. Louis, in New Orleans, who knows it better? And behold, you say it will not do!"

"Papa Clair, your heart is as white as your hair. I've quit the A. F. C. Made to quit——"

"Good!"

"Hurry-Up Parker discharged me without a second's notice."

"Descendant of a pig! He shall be insulted by you and challenge you. I will appear for you. Weapons? Knives. He is not so old he can hide behind his age and refuse to meet you."

"Impossible! Even if I wanted to fight him I couldn't."

"Holy blue! I—I do not understand, *M'sieu* Lander. I, Etienne Clair, walk in darkness, *m'sieu*. I have taught you the knife. I have made for it the scabbard for you to wear inside your boot. Knowing what I have taught you, wearing the blade I gave you, you can look the devil in the face and tell him to go home or have his tail cut off. And behold! You say you can not demand your safety from a low-down Indian-

trader. God's mercy! *M'sieu* Lander, if you can not explain——"

"You don't understand!" choked Lander. "The girl, his girl—Susette. But I mustn't mention names."

"Now God is good! It is unsaid. No name has been spoken!" cried the little Frenchman, sweeping off his shabby fur cap and bowing low to some imaginary princess. "Your high heart does you great honor. Your knife will sing the sweeter when we find honest work for it to do. The divinity of woman must always protect her men from her lover."

"There are three things I must do at once," mumbled Lander. "I must get work. Parker says the A. F. C. will stop me getting work in St. Louis unless I work on the levee."

"His father was a liar! There is always much work for honest men. Go on."

"I must settle my score with Phinny. He has told tales and set Parker against me."

"Surely he shall be paid. The third?"

"I must see—I mention no names."

"Of course. Etienne Clair understands." And again the low bow till the cap brushed the dirt. "It is delicate, eh? Now a message. Behold, I

can carry a message with eyes that turn in and see nothing, with a tongue to bring an answer which my ears do not hear."

"I have arranged for meeting her unless she is kept in the house."

"She shall not be kept in. I will enter from the rear and release her and——"

"No, no! I believe she will meet me. The hour is early as it was fixed before I knew what was to happen to me. I shall walk by the scholar Tradeau's house on Pine Street at eight o'clock."

"Most good! Then this scoundrel Phinny? You can look for work to-morrow but you should look for him to-night."

"I must find him to-night if I would sleep to-night."

"Brave spirit! I will go with you when you seek him."

Lander pondered for a moment, then said:

"Be in Tilton's drinking-place at nine. Wait for me until ten. He goes there. I've heard him speak of the place often."

"A vile place. Scum and cutthroats. I will wait for you."

They separated and Lander returned to his

room to brood and rage until the soft twilight hour was come.

He dressed in his best but looked forlorn for a lover as he made for the door and halted to stare at a plain leather scabbard on the wall. He slowly took it down. It was made to go inside his boot, and from it he drew the Frenchman's gift knife, a wonderfully effective weapon in the hands of a master. It was ground to a razor's edge, with a weight and solidity of haft and a length of blade that satisfied all exactions made upon it. It was a queer thing for a lover to take to his tryst, yet he pulled up his trousers leg and slipped the scabbard inside his boot.

His act was partly prompted by his affection for Papa Clair. He knew he was facing a crisis, and somehow it strengthened him to have with him a token from one he loved. Papa Clair had a superstitious regard for his knives. Lander had known him for two years and perhaps had absorbed some of his fancies. The old man had made him master of the knife; only there was none in all St. Louis outside the teacher who suspected the fact.

CHAPTER II

AT TILTON'S PLACE

TURNING in from Main to Pine Street Lander loitered along until he reached a position under some garden bushes which rose high above a fence and afforded a deep splotch of shadow. Two houses below was the home of Jean Baptiste Tradeau who tutored the youth of St. Louis. The lover's gaze was directed through the dusk over the way he had come, for the Parker home was beyond the intersection of Main Street, and it lacked fully fifteen minutes of the hour.

When he halted by the bushes he had the street to himself but now he heard steps and the low murmur of voices from the direction of the Tradeau house. He gave these sounds no attention, as he was now glimpsing a slim, erect figure gowned in white, passing through the shaft of light of a window up the street. His heart began

beating rapidly for he knew Susette would be at his side in another minute, and he tried to arrange his words for a coherent explanation. She would be deeply grieved and very indignant once she learned what had happened.

Then the steps behind grew louder. Two men were passing him and one of them laughed. Lander all but attracted their attention, for there was no one who laughed like Malcom Phinny.

"It wa'n't any of my business, mebbe, and yet I reckoned it was a bit, seeing as how you're the boss," Phinny was saying, thus establishing the identity of the second figure as that of Hurry-Up Parker. "I'd known for a long time he was shining up to Miss Susette."

"You had? Then why the devil didn't you tell me?" snarled Parker.

Phinny's apologetic answer was lost on Lander as the two were now drawing away from him. He was mightily concerned over what would happen in the next few rods, when the two men must meet the girl. Luck was badly against him. Had he named any other meeting-place there would not have been this interruption.

Slipping along the fence he took after the two men for a bit, then shifted across the walk and

stood behind a tree. Susette was now discernible in the gloaming, a little white patch against the gathering darkness. She took the outside of the walk and would have passed her father unrecognized had not Phinny, falling behind his employer a few steps, thrust out his head to peer impudently into her face.

"Why, Miss Susette! 'Ain't you lost?" he laughingly greeted.

Parker halted and swung on his heel, demanding, "You out walking alone?"

"Good evening, papa," she pertly responded. "It's perfectly proper to walk alone."

"It's also proper for you to walk with your father. Take my arm."

"But I wanted to go down the street a bit. I've been in the house for hours."

"Can't you get air enough on your own porch?" grumbled Parker.

"That's not exercise."

"Exercise, eh? Very well. Be back by nine. Phinny, you keep my daughter company. There are too many rough characters loose in this town for a young girl to be out alone."

"Yes, sir. Glad to look after Miss Susette," eagerly replied Phinny.

"You needn't put yourself out, Mr. Phinny," shortly spoke up the girl. "If I can't stroll to the end of the street without a guard I'll go back home."

Although accustomed to having her own way with her surly father there were times when he enforced the law and when she knew it would be useless to rebel. Such was the occasion now ; and when he commanded "Back home it is then," she dutifully took his arm and skipped along beside him. When they passed through the next shaft of light the disgruntled lover saw she was twisting her head to look in his direction. On the other side of Parker was Phinny, and he too was glancing back.

For a moment he blamed her for not making more of an effort to keep the appointment, then remembered she knew nothing of his encounter with her father. She'd console herself with thinking that the morrow would see him at the house.

"And I can't go to her," he groaned, moving slowly away toward Third Street. "After all, I reckon I'll have to send Papa Clair with a note. That's it. He shall take a note and she can meet me somewhere. But, that Phinny! One would think he was a member of the family."

An hour later Lander was at the Washington Avenue store of Sublette and Company, or the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, which was to give the American Fur Company the strongest opposition it had ever contended against. Ordinarily the store would have been closed, but Lander hoped the work of getting up the new equipment for the expedition about to start for the mountains would necessitate its being kept open. Nor was he disappointed, for although the store was dark there was a glimmer of light at one end. Making his way to the office entrance he looked through the window and saw Jim Bridger busily checking up some lists.

"Come in if you have to," rumbled Bridger's voice after Lander had rapped for the second time.

Lander entered. Bridger peered up from his work and greeted:

"What does a A. F. C. man want here at this hour?"

"Work," was the laconic reply.

"Through?"

"Dismissed."

"Why?"

"Hurry-Up Parker."

"He's a good trader, a ripping good river and mountain man. One of the kings of the Missouri. What's his complaint against you?"

"He has a daughter. I—I like her. He doesn't like to have me like her."

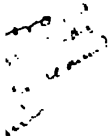
Bridger grinned broadly in sympathetic amusement.

"Old man acted rough, eh? They sometimes do unless you marry a' Injun squaw. No chance for trouble with them as a feller is never spoken to by, an' mustn't speak to, his father-in-law. Everything goes as smooth as a fiddle. But work?"

"Parker said the A. F. C. would see to it I got none in St. Louis."

"It's like the A. F. C. Won't give a man his bread an' butter an' don't 'low to let any one else. They'll have more important things to think about afore the season's over. Now let's see. We're all finished up here. A few weeks ago I could have used you fine. This fussing round with papers makes me nervous, an' I reckon you'd done it quicker'n a wolf can steal meat."

"I've done quite a bit of it. Parker wants to fix it to drive me from town. And you can't use me here?"



"Not now. Mebbe later." And Bridger's voice was very kind. "You see the outfit gits under way to-morrow. Some of the men are at St. Charles with the keelboat. Some are waiting at Lexington for the steamer to fetch up goods an' supplies. Etienne Prevost will take the keelboat as far as Fort Pierre. I shall take the land party through to the yearly rendezvous somewhere on Green River. An' some of the men are helling round St. Louis to-night an' will be lucky if they ain't left behind. I leave in an hour on my best mule to ride across country to Lexington. So, my young friend, the work down here is all done an' I'm sorry."

"It was only a chance," sighed Lander. "I didn't want to miss the shadow of a chance."

Bridger tugged at his brown hair and eyed Lander thoughtfully. Then he abruptly asked:

"Why don't you take on with a mountain trip? Give you two hundred 'n' ninety dollars for the next year 'n' half—eighteen months—an' such grub as can be found in the Injun country. You're young. Once you git started no knowing how far you'll go."

Lander's eyes glistened and for a moment Bridger believed he was to sign up. Then his gaze

fell. The mountain trip was all he would ask for it if were not for leaving Susette behind. At least he could not leave her until he had seen her and had explained things.

"If that offer could hold good for a few days," he began.

"No, sir! Take it or leave it as it stands," cut in Bridger. "We want men who can decide things right off the handle. The outfit starts to-morrow. Those who don't git across country to St. Charles to-night will git left."

"Well, I'm sorry I can't sign on, and I can't start to-morrow. I've several things to attend to. Much obliged for the offer, though."

"That's all right," grunted Bridger, nodding his head and returning to his lists.

Outside the store Lander recalled his appointment with Papa Clair at Tilton's place on the water-front near the foot of Cherry Street. He hurried to the rendezvous inflamed by his desire to find Phinny. In his despair and discouragement he needed something to feed upon; and so long as a successful love seemed dubious he would turn to the positive of hate. He now knew he had hated Phinny for a long time and had subconsciously resented the man's many petty

treacheries. With desire for little Susette burgeoning his path he had put hate to one side. Had the path held smooth his ignorance of Phinny would have been permanent. Outraged by Hurry-Up Parker's contemptuous treatment he fished out his grievance against Phinny from its mental pigeonhole and knew it was a matter demanding imperative attention.

He minutely reviewed his career as storeman for the 'A. F. C. and easily traced the thread of treachery running through Phinny's daily actions. He recalled the innumerable little disagreeable incidents at the beginning of his employment, when he was made to appear awkward and slow-witted when Parker's attention was unnecessarily attracted to his minor faults. Phinny's perseverance in undermining his chances for favorable attention was like the malicious gnawing of the Missouri at its banks. What at the time had impressed him as being purposeless acts of mischief now bobbed to the surface of his recollections as deliberate traps. Phinny had plotted systematically from the beginning against the blind lover.

Lander's new perspective also permitted him to discern quite accurately the time Hurry-Up Parker shifted from his usual gruff attitude to evi-

dences of surly dislike. Phinny was slated for promotion to Cabanne's Post, or Fort Union, on the upper river. Lander was being groomed to take his place in the store. Shortly after this arrangement was tacitly understood by Parker and his two employees, Parker had displayed a new face and the promotion was not spoken of again.

Lander was compelled to admit to himself that his failure to advance might be due in part to his own indifference. He had entered the A. F. C. with a fine mettle to see service above the Yellowstone. He had longed to take his chances with the keelboats fighting their way by the treacherous Aricara villages in the land of the Sioux near the mouth of Grand River. He had dreamed of visiting the Cheyennes at the eastern base of the Black Hills. There were the Mandans and Minnetarees along the Upper Missouri and the Knife to be explored, and the stories of Lewis and Clark to be verified. Between their villages and the Milk and extending far north were the numerous and powerful Assiniboina to be conquered in trade. From the Milk to the source of the Missouri were the Blackfeet, ferocious in their hatred toward the whites. What better adventur-

ing than the sharp dash into the beaver country! In the valleys of the Yellowstone and the Big Horn were the Crows with their strange liking to have white men live among them. He eagerly had sought his information from returning traders and trappers. He had absorbed much about the various nations. He had drawn deductions his informants were too lazy mentally to indulge in, such as the probable halting of the fur trade for many years if the nations along the Missouri had not been poor boatmen, seeking the river largely for water and fuel. Had they been like the Eastern Indians, skilful in water-craft, what chance would boats have had prior to the coming of steam? And had the wooden canoe and the flatboat and keelboat been discouraged from penetrating the unknown country would steam have become sufficiently interested to take over the river?

There was no doubt but that he had started in on his work with a fine zeal, and that Parker had seized him as an unusual youngster and had been impressed by his enthusiasm. Then came the curly-headed rattle-pate, and the swish of her dainty skirts had sent all his fine ambitions a-flying.

As he made for Tilton's he confessed there was much room for self-criticism. He had feebly endeavored to criticize himself before, but his reproaches were always put to flight by the soothing realization he would see Susette on the morrow. So he had kept at his dead tasks, exchanging his chance to become a mountain man for the sake of her sweet smiles.

There was Bridger. He might have been like Bridger, a born topographer, more familiar with the mountain passes and streams than even Kit Carson. Bridger and Carson had trapped together on the Powder River two years back.

One year before, when but twenty-six years old, Bridger with Milton Sublette, Henry Frack and John B. Gervaise, had bought out the old partners of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company. Under Bridger's lead two hundred men had passed through the Big Horn basin, had crossed the Yellowstone, had followed the Missouri to its three forks, then up the Jefferson to the Divide and on to the Great Salt Lake. Twelve hundred miles before they returned to winter on the Powder.

"And all I've done is to wear out a path between goods and supplies in the store," groaned

Lander. "Bridger, not much older'n I am, can travel all over the continent; and I can't make a trail to Pine Street."

Lander was honest enough not to blame Phinny for those shortcomings which love was responsible for.

"But—— He might 'a' let me alone. He could 'a' seen I was slipping back in the old man's good-will without giving me the sly kicks he did to make me slip faster."

What would Jim Bridger have 'done had Phinny plotted against *him*? He would have made him "chaw dirt." No doubt about that. But Hurry-Up Parker would never discourage Jim Bridger if he came wooing Susette. Old Parker would have welcomed him with both hands, brought out a bottle and insisted on making a night of it, and would have concluded the bout with urging his son-in-law to take a large part in the affairs of the A. F. C.

All St. Louis knew—and this meant all the fur-trading world—that Bridger was a thorn to the A. F. C. and would give the powerful organization a mighty hard fight this season. Already he had aroused the A. F. C. to a point where it admitted his mettle by sending men to dog him

over the country and to compete with him once he had led the way to choice beaver regions. Bridger had been recognized as a menace. He was asked into the city office for drinks and cigars. Lander, the clerk, was ignominiously driven from the premises.

"I'll even up with Phinny, then get work," concluded Lander as he neared Tilton's. "I'd gone with Bridger in a minute if he wasn't in such a hurry to get started."

A squeaking fiddle and a rough chorus focused his mind on the job ahead of him. Throwing open the door he stepped through and to one side and leaned against the wall while he got his bearings, for the place was foggy with tobacco smoke. The usual rough-scuff of river loungers was draped over the long bar. In the corners and along the sides of the big room were a dozen mountain men, sleeping off their last spree before returning to fight the Blackfeet.

Keelboat men who would stick to the river, who preferred cordelling their long crafts the thousand odd miles to seeking fortune in the mountains, were uproariously drunk and dancing in the middle of the floor. Some were French Canadians, others—and these were more favored

by traders—were St. Louis creoles. Both types were light-hearted and irresponsible. They were capable of carrying a thousand-foot tow-line the full length of the Missouri, forcing their way through all natural obstacles, but of not much account when the Indians rode along the shores and enfiladed them with arrows and balls and invited them to come up and make a real fight. When it came to battle it was the long-haired and bewhiskered trapper, who would rather walk from St. Louis to the Rockies than to carry a tow-line a day's journey, who would quit his yarning and smoking and gambling to swarm up the bank and debate the matter.

In addition to these well-known specimens of the frontier town there were strangers, easily classified but not to be included in the lists of useful occupations. These were less boisterous than the drunken boatmen, less sleepy and indifferent than the mountain men. They drank with their backs to the wall and out of range of windows. Even when swallowing their fiery potations they did not close the eye or roll it to the ceiling in mute testimony to the liquor's potency. They tipped the glass rather than the head and *maintained* a level gaze on the door, and ceased

swallowing until they had settled the status of each newcomer. These were the derelicts from beyond the Mississippi, fleeing the noose, creatures with blood on their souls and who needed only the opportunity to augment their sins by further killings. It was the influx of these desperadoes that gave St. Louis a name for lawlessness.

Lander swept the murky room and met the challenging stare of a dozen suspicious eyes, then started down the bar, the white head of Papa Clair having caught his eye. The old man flung up a hand and beckoned to him briskly. The lawbreakers noted the gesture of welcome and returned to their drink.

Papa was on a bench in the corner near a table. At the table, but not of his company, were four men who were neither traders, trappers, nor river men. Their secrecy in conversing, the failure of the strong liquor to loosen their tongues, the garishment of pistols and long knife in the belt of each, and—this as indicative as all else—the timidity and deference of the mulatto serving their table, tagged them as superlative fugitives from eastern justice, most excellent fellows to keep away from.

In his haste to join his friend fenced off in the corner Lander's foot struck against the chair at the end of the table, causing the occupant's hand to spill his liquor. His friends laughed jeeringly. With a vile outcry, without bothering to draw a weapon from his bristling belt, the man sprang to his feet and swung the bottle of liquor above his head. Lander stood as stupefied, his wits paralyzed, and he would have been brained if it had not been for the glittering'streak over the table.

With a roar of pain the man dropped the bottle and stared aghast at the riven forearm. Lightly as a cat old Papa Clair came swarming over the table, a second blade clutched by the haft, and with a yank that sent the desperado reeling into his chair with sickness he recovered his knife, softly crying:

"It is mine. Please!"

"Lawful heart, but he's done gone an' throwed a knife through Buck's arm!" howled one of the four; and he came to his feet, his hand fumbling at his belt.

The others pushed back their chairs, but before they could rise Papa Clair's left hand poised a *knife* by the tip, the other held for a thrust in

his right hand. Lander came to his senses and whipped out his blade from his boot. Papa Clair jolted him to the rear with an elbow and, mincing aside a few steps to confront the man on his feet, he purred:

"Ah, *m'sieu* knows the knife. See and behold! I drop my hand. I take the knife by the handle. I will not move till *m'sieu* lifts his blade and is ready to throw."

A river-rat squirmed up to the table and whispered hoarsely in the desperado's ear. With a sickly grimace the man placed both hands on the table. His friends glared at him in wonderment. He explained:

"Devil Clair. Go down to the Gulf an' ask 'bout him in th' old days. If any on ye wants to pick up this trouble an' carry a fight to him, ye're welcome to my chance. I quits. I've seen a 'gator chaw up a puppy. There ain't a bit o' fight left in my whole natur'." Then to Papa Clair and with a side nod toward the wounded man, "Ye got through with Hepsy?"

Papa Clair was grieved and replacing one knife tugged at his long white mustache regretfully.

"No spirit," he sighed to Lander. "When I

was young— Such a long, well-lighted room, with plenty of room for the people to line up and enjoy it.... He speaks of the Gulf. Ah, those were days! Descendant of pig-devils, stick out your arm."

This to the groaning wounded man. The man timidly obeyed. Papa Clair examined the wound and proudly proclaimed to the staring, silent patrons of the place:

"Through the flesh! The bone is barely touched. As pretty a cast as I ever made. Wash it with whisky and if there isn't too much poison in the blood it will heal rapidly.... Take *m'sieu* away. He needs quiet and rest. And I need this table."

The last was accompanied by a bristling glance at the wounded man's friends, a baleful glance that hoped to find opposition. The three men rose and led their groaning friend down the room to the door, followed by jeers and laughter from the onlookers. Papa Clair replaced the knife in his boot and said:

"My friend, I have waited long for you. Your man has not been in. Where have you been? What have you done?"

"Failed in everything I tried. Parker came

along before I could see my little friend. But I'll see her to-morrow. I found Jim Bridger in the Washington Avenue store and tried to get work with his company. But his outfit starts to-morrow; and of course I couldn't go without seeing the lady. Two failures. If they go in threes it means I shall not see Phinny and settle my score with him to-night."

"It is to be regretted your not seeing your little friend to-night. If you could have explained to her to-night— But there; you didn't know when you went to meet her that you might ask work off Bridger. He is a great man. Not so good with the knife as Jim Baker, yet a great man. I was with him in Cache Valley on Bear River in the winter of twenty-four. Etienne Prevost had charge of us during our trapping on the Wind and Green that season. We did not agree about the course of the Bear and wagers were made. It was night and Bridger rose and said he would settle the dispute. He left the fire and disappeared. When we saw him again it was when he came back from the Great Salt Lake. He had followed the Bear to the lake. He had found the water salt. He was the first white man to see that body of water. The Spaniards say

one of their missionaries, Friar Escalante of Santa Fé, visited the lake in seventeen seventy-five. I believe *M'sieu* Bridger was the first. And do you know, my friend, we all believed the lake was an arm of the Pacific until the next season when four of our men visited it and explored the shore line in skin-boats and found it had no outlet."

"Bridger's a good mountain man, all right," shortly agreed Lander, his own failures making the other's praise offensive. "But he has his weak spots. All about cooking fish and meat in boiling springs, hot water shooting into the air nearly a hundred feet! If that wasn't enough he insists the hot water spouts at certain times, just so long a time apart. Wonder who keeps watch of it and turns it off and on every so often. Then there's his cave of Indian war-paint. Wonder why any Indians bother to trade robes for our vermilion when they can have it for nothing at any time!"

"That is up in the Crow 'country. He had a chance to look about up there. He may forget and fill up the chinks with fancies, yet he must have seen something," wistfully defended Papa Clair, his white brows drawn down in bushy

bewilderment. "So fine a man can not be a liar. When he told me about pickling enough buffalo in the Great Salt Lake to last a big band of trappers a whole season I could see there was sense to the scheme. But, my friend, I'm sorry he told about the cooking springs. Warm water perhaps; but to catch fish from a stream and throw them over and boil them—name of a pipe! Yet I try to believe him. The pickling of buffalo rang true but—there, there! He is a fine man. Let us not say more about it."

"Why hasn't some one else seen that wonderful lake, sixty miles long, hemmed in by mountains?" persisted Lander.

Papa shrugged his thin shoulders and with a malicious little grin said:

"I know one way to prove it is, or isn't. If I were younger I should do it by myself. That is to go there and look about. If I were younger—Well, well, Jim Bridger has seen so much that is wonderful he has no need to tell fairy stories. I swallowed his pickled buffalo. Why not? But behold! I feel depressed when he tells of the cooking-spring. The cave of war-paint. Some one must have left some paint there. But to say it grows—holy blue! Yet he saw something.

Perhaps the lake wasn't sixty miles long. Perhaps the water was not scalding hot, just warm. Who knows? And yet when I was very young, even before the Missouris were exterminated, when the Otoes and Kansas tribes were something besides names, I heard strange stories from the up-river country—like fairy stories. But yet so wonderful a country must have wonderful secrets. Even in the few years left to me and my knives I believe I could uncover some strange things up there. Only the good God knows it all. And if I did they would call me, 'Papa Clair, the old liar.' ”

“Not to your face, Papa,” warmly declared Lander. “And I haven't thanked you yet for stopping that fellow from braining me. My head was asleep. I saw him lift the bottle over me and it seemed I was dreaming and couldn't move a peg. If some one had touched me, just to start me—but no one did. So, old friend, I owe you a life.”

“Take good care of it. Keep it clean for the little friend. Wait!”

He beckoned to a boy and gave an order. The boy brought a bottle of French wine which Papa Clair lovingly decanted, and then proposed :

"To *Her!* We shall see different pictures as we drink; yet it is the same little woman to be found in every land where love is."

They drank standing, the ceremony attracting the attention of those near by. As they were resuming their seats the door opened with a crash, and Malcom Phinny, followed by several men, entered. He flapped his arms and crowed a challenge. River men stirred uneasily, anxious to cut his comb. Old mountain men lazily opened their eyes, sniffed in contempt, and went back to their sleep.

Phinny undoubtedly would have been quickly accommodated with more trouble than he could carry had not Tilton rushed from behind the bar and greeted him effusively, thus branding him as a friend and one who was protected by the warning, "Hands off."

"Coming man in the A. F. C.," a trader at the table next to Clair's informed his companion, a long-haired free trapper.

"To —— with the A. F. C.," growled the trapper. "He'll be a goin' man if he does any more ki-yi-yiing round here."

Papa Clair reached forward and tapped him lightly on the shoulder and sweetly asked:

"Is it not much better, *m'sieu*, for the old men of the village to correct their young men than for outsiders to take over the task?"

The trapper gave him a belligerent glance, recognized the wrinkled face, and fretfully snarled:

"I don't want none o' yer fight, Etienne Clair. If yer knife is lookin' for meat it can look farther."

Papa sighed despondently and settled back and toyed with his wine. Lander, who was watching Phinny, was scarcely conscious of this little by-play; and as he gazed his eyes glared wickedly. The loss of his position, the warning to keep away from the Pine Street home and Susette, were all attributed to the dark face up the line.

Phinny had been drinking enough to make him reckless. If not for Tilton's public avowal of favor a dozen hands would have pawed at him before he was ten feet inside the door. Again he flapped his arms and crowed. Beyond side glances no attention was paid him this time. Cocking his head insolently he strutted the length of the bar. Papa Clair heard Lander's boots scrape on the rough floor as he drew his feet under him.

Phinny now saw him and his dark eyes glit-

tered vindictively. Taking a position at the end of the bar where he could keep his gaze on Lander, he rolled some coins on the slab and in a loud voice invited:

"Every one drink to my luck in gitting rid of a snake, a two-legged snake, that crawled out of my path and knows better than to return."

"Curse him!" hissed Lander, his hand dropping down to his boot and playing with the haft of his knife.

"Softly, softly. It all works out very sweetly," purred Papa Clair, his blue eyes beaming cheerily. "Patience. A well-lighted room, a company worshipful of good entertainment, and fair play in the person of Etienne Clair. But let it come naturally."

The liquor was speedily consumed, and Phinny, noting the strained expression on Lander's face, made more coins dance on the bar and bawled:

"It's my night. It's been my day. To-morrow will be my day. Once more with me, and drink hearty. This time to 'S'— the only woman west of the Mississippi."

"Base-born dog!" growled Papa Clair, his white beard bristling.

Lander rose to his feet and picked up his glass.

Before he could hurl it Phinny threw his glass, striking Lander on the arm but doing no harm.

"You'll fight, you sneak!" roared Lander.

"Oh, my friend, my friend," groaned Papa Clair, seizing Lander's arm and preventing him from leaping at his enemy. "Such roughness! Such lack of wit! I am embarrassed!"

"You heard him!" choked Lander, trying to throw off the detaining hand.

"You've played into his hands. You've challenged him," sighed the old man, his long, slim fingers contracting like circlets of steel. "It could have been so pretty. Now it becomes a brawl....But wait! He had no right to throw the glass and make you challenge him. You gave the first affront when you rose to hurl your glass. Hell's devils! Does he think to conduct this like a keelboat fight? I will straighten it out. I will make his friends see it in the true light. He must challenge you, and you shall have choice of weapons."

He rose with a knife held back of his arm and took a step toward Phinny, when Lander swept him behind him, hoarsely objecting:

"No, no. Let it finish as it began." Then to

Phinny: "I said you must fight. You have lost your tongue?"

"Yes, I'll fight," gritted Phinny. "Tilton will look after me. I only demand that we fight at once. Here."

"Not here," protested Tilton. "Gentlemen, please be still. I'll look after my friend. I suppose this young cock-a-lorum can scare up a friend."

"*Diable m'emporte!*" ejaculated Papa Clair, gliding forward. "Come! What do you mean? You try to pick a quarrel with an old man. Yes. I appear for *M'sieu* Lander. Behold, you speak slurringly of me to him. This is very bad. Come!"

Tilton's liquor-flushed face became pallid. Fragments of strange tales concerning Papa Clair's wild youth flocked through the man's mind—wicked old stories of the Gulf, when men made their own laws, whispers of lonely lagoons that were visited only by piratical craft.

"I meant I reckined it might be difficult for him to reach his friends in time to fight at once. No harm was meant. As you represent him s'pose we talk it over. Mebbe we can fix it up without any fighting."

"Then you don't stand for me," cried Phinny, whisky-courageous, and he walked to the upper end of the bar.

"Oh, you shall have your satisfy, young rooster," sneered Papa Clair, in nowise contented with Tilton's evasion of a quarrel.

Tilton waved the crowd back and talked earnestly to Papa who heard him sullenly.

"I agree," shortly said Papa as the saloon-keeper finished. "It is poor sport when so much better could be had for the asking."

With that he returned to Lander, twisting his long mustaches and trembling with anger.

"We are to go over to Bloody Island," he rapped out.

"Good!"

"As the challenged person he chooses pistols. Sacrilege!" snapped Papa.

"I do not care. Let it be pistols. Only let's go to business."

"My friend, be patient. You shall soon face him. It is not because I fear for you with pistols that I grieve. It is because you blundered and played into their hands. When all was so prettily staged for clean knife-play! Bah! Honor is more easily satisfied these days. But there were

times when one did not have to wait a year to see the knife-fight. Well, well. Let us get along with it. Perhaps some time we shall deserve better. We go at once. The moon is up. It will be light enough to exchange shots."

CHAPTER III

THE DUEL

IT LACKED an hour of midnight when Jim Bridger locked the Washington Avenue store and walked down to the river-front. He was about to leave the city for another year in the mountains, and there was no guarantee he would ever return. There were many forgotten graves along the Missouri and its tributaries. Bridger meditated calmly on the possible vicissitudes of the season ahead, and knew that for a certain percentage of his mountain men this would be the last trip to the Rockies.

He had halted close to the river and found himself staring through the soft moonlight at Bloody Island. The island, famous as a dueling-ground for the hot spirits of the time, who would not be satisfied with anything short of a rival's blood, always fascinated him. As a boy he knew its history. Often he had wandered over it and paused

to rest in the shade of the huge cottonwood which had stood there a sturdy tree long before St. Charles, *Petite Côte*, began life as the first settlement on the Missouri, or two years before St. Louis had its beginning.

Bridger was thirteen years old and supporting himself and his sister with his ferry-boat when Thomas H. Benton, "Old Bullion," and Charles Lucas fought two duels on the island, Lucas being killed. Six years later Joshua Barton, a brother of the first United States Senator from Missouri, was killed by Thomas Rector under the cottonwood. And could he have read the future for the period of but four months he would have known that Major Thomas Biddle, paymaster of the United States 'Army, and Congressman Spencer Pettis were to kill each other, the range being but five feet.

As he was recalling the historic encounters, and many others of lesser notoriety, he was disturbed by the dipping of paddles and the appearance of a long dugout making for the island. His spell vanished and he would have left the levee had he not observed that the canoe was filled with men. The hour, the number of men in the twenty-five footer, told him that only one errand

could call them to Bloody Island. He stayed his steps and stared after them curious to witness the finale of the affair. A second canoe shot into the moonlight, but this was smaller than the other and seemed to contain but two men. From the forward canoe a deep voice bawled :

“American Fur ag’in’ th’ world!”

This sentiment was loudly cheered. Bridger, who was gathering himself to give the autocratic A. F. C. the fight of its life, walked back to the water’s edge and frowned thoughtfully as he watched the progress of the second craft.

“There’s going to be a fight. First canoe’s filled plumb full of A. F. C. men. Them two most likely are Opposition men. They oughter have some one sorter to look after them. I’d hate to be the only stranger on the island in a crowd of A. F. C. men if any blood was to be spilled. I ain’t got the time but I reckon I’ll drop over an’ just see how it works out.”

Searching up and down the levee he soon found a small dugout and with an improvised paddle made for the end of the island.

Bridger was now beginning to be recognized as the foremost mountain man of his time. He had been schooled by General Ashley, and had

trapped and explored every tributary of the Platte and Yellowstone with such men as Lucien B. Maxwell, Carson, and Jim Baker. He was old in the ways of the plains and mountains before he became one of the heads of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company. He had been present at the attack on the villages of the treacherous Aricaras in the spring of 1823, the first campaign against trans-Mississippi Indians conducted by a United States army, when Ashley and his veterans joined forces with General Atkinson and his "Missouri Legion." The A. F. C. would gladly buy his services, being especially troubled and incensed because he followed his old chief's example of taking trappers to the mountains without depending upon the good-will of the natives, or on settled trading-posts. The powerful organization was now prepared to fight him at his own game by sending companies of men to dog his steps and compete with him at every turn; and in doing this the A. F. C. admitted his worth as a trader and advertised their fear of him as an opponent.

Bridger this night was on the eve of a battle royal for beaver, but he had no thought except for the fight between unknown men on Bloody Island. The sentiment from the leading canoe,

revealing the men were 'A. F. C. sympathizers, made him keen to follow and see that the minority received fair play. Landing at the nose of the island he pulled up his canoe. Then with a mastery of woodcraft that would have made an Indian jealous he threaded his way toward the opening where the duels were always fought. Before he reached the spot he caught the sound of voices, one in particular being raised most blatantly.

"That would be Tilton," he muttered. "Owned by the A. F. C. body an' soul, if he happens to have any such thing."

"I'm running this show!" Tilton shouted as Bridger reached the end of the bush growth and stood unobserved in the shadows and watched the moon-lighted scene.

"A thousand pardons, *m'sieu*," remonstrated a soft voice. "But behold, you will run on to my knife if you fail in courtesy to *M'sieu* Lander."

"The devil! Young Lander, who wanted a job with me!" muttered Bridger. "Wouldn't go to the mountains along of leaving his girl. Now he takes a chance on losing his life—an' all of a pleasant evening. He must have some spirit. *Mebbe* I misjudged him."

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"Mister Phinny, as th' challenged party, has said pistols," began Tilton.

"To be sure. Behold, it is his right," broke in Papa Clair. "But the distance and the positions are not for you to name. We will toss a coin for position, and we will decide between us how far apart they shall stand."

"Oh, let's have it over with," grumbled Lander. "Give me a pistol and stand the skunk before me. If he isn't near enough I'll go after him."

"You'll find me near enough to put a ball through your heart, or my name ain't Malcom Phinny," jeered the other principal.

"Phinny?" mused Bridger. "The same who went to bring down the Pawnee trade to Cabanne's, found them away on a war-path and stole their corn, and made them believe it was our men."

"I reckon they don't want any of our fight," sneered one of Phinny's adherents from the edge of the grove.

"Pardon! Does *m'sieu* want to fight?" politely inquired Papa Clair, running toward the group in the shadows.

"Keep that sticker 'way from my ribs!" frantically yelled the man.

"Come back here, Papa. This is growing into a joke. That swarthy dog doesn't want to fight. Hurry or they'll be swimming back to the city," called out Lander.

"My man will fight at fifteen paces," snarled Tilton.

"Very well. It is most excellent to find he will fight at all," said Papa Clair. "If one stands where *M'sieu* Tilton is standing, and one here in my tracks, the light will be equal and *M'sieu* Tilton can place his man without tossing the coin."

"Not by a —— sight!" growled Tilton. Then with a vicious laugh: "This is for blood. Keep yer Frenchy perliteness to yerself. We'll toss a coin. Th' winner picks any spot in the openin' he wants to an' t'other man must face him. Hi, Dillings! Step out here an' flip a coin."

Bridger gave a low, amused laugh at the bald-faced plan to do murder. Papa Clair spat with a hissing noise and ominously objected:

"Be careful, *M'sieu* Tilton. Be very careful. Not *M'sieu* Dillings. He has the prejudice. He has said he did not believe my man wanted the fight. We do not trust him. No."

"Well, I can't toss it; neither can ye toss it;

neither can Phinny nor Lander. Name any one ye want to," affably replied Tilton.

"But you all are of the same," protested Clair. "Let them stand as I said with the light fair for both."

"Ye keep on backin' water an' there won't be enough light to fight by," warned a voice from the shadows.

"We know our rights. Ye ain't new to this game, Papa Clair," gravely said Tilton. "I insist on th' coin bein' flipped. Name any man on this island; we'll be satisfied an' never make a yip; only be quick."

"You know well we have no friends here," replied Clair savagely. "You bring a crowd of men. We two are here alone."

"And only one of you is going back," taunted Phinny.

"Dog! Defiler of the sacred dueling-ground! *Nom de Dieu!* It is more the murder trap!" shrilly cried Clair.

"Name some one or Dillings shall toss th' coin," peremptorily announced Tilton.

"Wouldn't that be pretty raw, Tilton?" drawled Bridger, moving from the bushes.

The deep silence evidenced how greatly his

intrusion had jolted the men. Before any one spoke or made a move he advanced into the opening and inquired, "Will I do, Papa Clair?"

"The devil would do, rather than any of these A. F. C. men," cried Clair. "I can't see you well, *m'sieu*. Your voice is that of some one I have known and liked. You can't be an A. F. C. man. Give your name."

"Jim Bridger. Do I suit?"

"To the sky and ground!" enthusiastically exclaimed Lander.

"Holy blue! Better than an angel!" cried Papa Clair.

"Hold on a minute!" yelled Tilton, still non-plused but realizing he must say something. "I reckon it ain't just reg'lar for a' outsider to come crowding like this. How many yer men hiding back there?"

"Never you mind my men, you 'Ricaree-hearted skunk. You and your rotten crowd won't be hurt if you don't try any dirty work. All ready? Here goes." The coin glittered in the moonlight. Phinny called out anxiously.

"You lost," announced Bridger.

"How do we know that?" cried Tilton.

Bridger stood beside him in two strides. The

spectators could not see just what took place, but all could hear Bridger say:

"You heard me say that your man lost the call. What do you mean by your words? You making off to throw a doubt 'bout my honesty? Quick!"

"No, no, Mister Bridger. I spoke afore I thought," gasped Tilton.

"Some time some one will git fussed up an' you won't have time to think," somberly warned Bridger. "Lander, choose your position. You can stand and face anywhere you will."

According to Tilton's own terms Lander could have selected a position in the shadows of the bushes and compelled his man to stand in the bright moonlight. Tilton expected him to take the advantage, especially when Papa Clair repeated Tilton's words, "This is for blood." Lander hesitated a moment, not that he purposed seeking any undue advantage but solely to make Phinny and his followers squirm.

"Don't sweat any more, Phinny," he called out. "I will stand here, facing Tilton. Measure the ground."

"An' I'll stand over here near my old friends, Dillings an' others, all good A. F. C. men," chuckled Bridger, crossing to the sullen group.

"Ah, now we shall have a decent fight. Only with the knife it would be much cleaner. If *m'sieu* even now wishes to change and fight with the knife my man will not object. But of course not at the present distance."

"No, no," snarled Phinny, taking a pistol from Tilton and gripping it nervously.

Tilton stepped off the distance, Papa Clair mincing along at his side to see he did not make it more than fifteen paces.

"Stand here, Phinny," Tilton gruffly called. "Shall I give the word, Clair?"

"My friend, *M'sieu* Bridger, is better to give the word. No one objects?"

Tilton bit his lips but did not object. Bridger was to be reckoned with in more ways than one. In a physical contest there was no one between the Missouri and the Rockies who could make him hold back from trouble. He was one who never forgot a friend or an injury. His powerful personality, despite his lack of years, already was registering on St. Louis. He typed the ideals of the fur trade that existed before the A. F. C. made its headquarters in St. Louis in 1822.

"I'm willin'. It's only a matter o' countin'," sullenly replied Tilton.

"Ah, men count, and men count," ironically murmured Clair. "If *M'sieu* Bridger has the great politeness to favor us."

Bridger strode to a position midway between the two men, halting just out of line of their fire, and humorously remarked:

"I didn't come for the job. But if you all say I must, why, I must."

Suddenly wheeling to face the men lined up along the bushes he hooked his fingers in his belt and there was no humor now in his voice as he warned:

"I'll kill any man or men who break in on this game." Then to the duelists: "I shall slowly count three. After the word three you can fire."

"And I hold my knife by the tip. My eyes are watching *M'sieu* Tilton," added Papa Clair.

"Yer s'picious!" growled Tilton, edging away from his principal. "Give the word an' let's have it over with."

"Make ready. Are you both ready?" called out Bridger sharply.

"Ready here," snarled Phinny.

"Ready," quietly called out Lander.

"One—two—three," slowly and distinctly counted Bridger.

Phinny fired while the last word was being uttered, his ball whistling by Lander's ear. An instant later Lander fired, and his opponent half turned, remained motionless for a moment, then slumped down on his knees and rolled over.

Bridger started toward him, wrathfully crying:

"The miserable cur, to fire before he got the word!"

Tilton reached the prostrate figure first and tore open his shirt, and cried out:

"Plumb through th' heart!"

Bridger came to a halt. All the others stood like stumps for a count of five. Then Dillings' voice croaked:

"The devil's to pay for this. Can't kill a' A. F. C. man like that!"

With a harsh laugh of triumph Papa Clair jeered:

"*M'sieu* is much in the mistake. The A. F. C. men can be killed just like that."

There was an uneasy stirring by the bushes, and the metallic click of a pistol being cocked brought Bridger's hands from his belt, holding two pistols; and he warned:

"A fair fight on Lander's part. A try at murder on Phinny's part. Had he killed Lander I

should have killed him for firing before the word was given. All stay where you are till we're afloat, or more'n one corpse will be toted from this place."

"If any one is grieved and wishes to settle a point of honor with me, I will remain. I, Etienne Clair, an old man," began Papa.

But Bridger cut him short by fairly taking him under his arm and disappearing among the bushes with Lander at his side.

"You two take your canoe an' paddle to the foot of the island. I've got a canoe there an' will join you in a few minutes."

They jumped into their dugout and shot the craft down-stream. Bridger remained in the narrow path, over which so many vindicators of honor had traveled, and waited. From the opening came a confused murmuring of many voices. Then some one passionately cried out:

"Is three men to git away like that? It's light 'nough to pick 'em off in th' canoe. Come on!"

There was a rush of feet, a floundering about in the narrow path, then a precipitate halt as Bridger coldly warned:

"Stand back. A bullet for the next man who comes another step."

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"Jim Bridger!" ejaculated one of the men.

"An' he's waiting to see who'll be first to enter his butcher-shop," was the grim reply.

"We want to take Phinny across," called out Tilton.

"No hurry in his case. Stick where you are for a few minutes."

With this warning Bridger noiselessly slipped into cover and swiftly retreated to the shore and peered down-stream. The dugout was not in sight. He waited a couple of minutes for good measure, and then announced:

"I'll count twenty, slow-like, then the path is open."

The men waited for him to commence counting. But he had ducked into the bushes and was following the path which skirted the shore, and soon came to where he had left his canoe. Holding their dugout stationary by grasping some overhanging branches Papa Clair and Lander were waiting for him. Pushing off his canoe and leaping in he softly cautioned:

"Git work out of your paddles. They're skunks, but there's a full dozen of 'em; an' a bullet from a coward's gun might kill the bravest *man* that ever lived."

He led the way and it was not until they were nearing the levee that they discerned the other dugout slowly making the crossing. As they landed and hurriedly walked up the levee Bridger said: "The man Dillings 'lowed there'd be trouble. I reckon he was right so far as our young friend is mixed in it, Papa."

"It was a fair fight. No one can bother him," said Clair.

"He won't be bothered by the law but he'll be a marked man so long as that band of wolves feels fretted over to-night's work. Some day he'll turn up missing. Mebbe not to-morrow or next day, but soon. He must quit town for a spell if he wants to keep on living."

"I must see some one before I quit town," said Lander, his mind in a whirl.

"All right. You oughter know your own business best. But the chances is you'll never grow up an' die an' leave her a widder. But that's your game."

"*M'sieu* Bridger is right as he always is right," sighed Papa Clair. "If they had fought with knives no one would make trouble. If those who want to pick up the quarrel would come out in the open like men you should stay and meet them one

by one, always choosing knives, as you would be the challenged party. But a shot in the dark, a knife-thrust while you sleep! Bah, the savages! My young friend, you must leave St. Louis."

"He must go to-night," added Bridger.

"Go? Where to?" asked Lander.

"Up or down the river," retorted the old man.

"With no work ahead of him an' probably without much money," mused Bridger. "No; that won't do. They could trail him easy an' find the killing better down-river than right here in St. Louis. This is the best way; go across country an' make St. Charles by morning. Some of my men are there, waiting for the rest of the band to join 'em. Etienne Prevost is there with a keelboat. He'll take the boat up to Lexington an' some of the men will keep abreast of him with the mules. The mules are for the band at Lexington who are to go overland while Prevost takes the boat on up to Fort Pierre. You can go on the keelboat from St. Charles to Lexington, or you can stick along with the men driving the mules. By the time you reach Lexington you'll have made up your mind whether you'll stick to the boat an' go to Fort Pierre, or make straight for the mountains with the land party. I shall

ride 'cross-country an' join or catch up with the land party at Lexington. Once in the mountains all A. F. C. influence this side of judgment day can't make you budge, but mebbe a Injun will dance your sculp."

"If I must go, I must," sighed Lander. "I'll start at once, but I must write a letter first—and get it delivered."

"I'll act for you, my friend," promptly offered Papa Clair. "Holy blue! What is to become of me after you are gone? No more evening lessons . . . Yet behold, you know about all I can teach. No more evening walks down by Chouteau's old grist-mill. I have lived my day."

"I'll be back inside of two years if I'm lucky," lugubriously consoled Lander.

"Too much talk," snapped Bridger. "That gang has landed. No knowing when they may strike your trail. Git about your letter-writing. Pretty soon they may be combing the city for you. I'll hitch a mule back of my store. I'm off at once to make Lexington. You can make St. Charles by morning easy. Don't stop to git any outfit. Just take your gun an' ride like the devil. Prevost will outfit you. Tell him I sent you—that I'm on my way to Lexington."

"Would Tilton dare to attack me here in the city? Isn't there any law in St. Louis? Or can the friends of the A. F. C. do just as they want to?" demanded Lander, beginning to grow wrathful at the prospects of enforced flight.

"Oh, Tilton isn't anybody's fool," assured Bridger. "He won't appear in what happens in St. Louis. But there's a choice collection of murderers an' robbers hanging around his saloon who'll do any dirty work for a prime beaverskin. If they slip up on the job Tilton won't be dragged in. He'll just send out another gang after you."

They parted, Bridger going to procure a mule for the fugitive, the latter and Papa Clair hurrying to the Market Street room. Here Lander wrote a long letter, explaining his plight and vowing his undying love, and pleading for Miss Susette to wait for him. While he wrote Papa Clair laid out his rifle and trappings. With a long-drawn sigh Lander finished, sanded and sealed the missive and handed it to Papa Clair, and was asking his friend how he proposed to deliver it unsuspected by Hurry-Up Parker, when the old man stuffed the letter inside his coat, clutched Lander by the arm and with his free *hand* extinguished the light.



**old man stuffed the letter in his pocket and extinguished
the light.**

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"The devil!" faintly ejaculated Lander, rubbing his eyes in the darkness.

"No, men. On the stairs," softly whispered Papa.

"Tilton?" whispered Lander, fumbling round and securing his rifle and slipping on his belt, powder-horn and other hunting accouterments.

"No such luck. Men sent by him. Men he will wash his hands of if they blunder. They're working for blood-money. Stand here with me behind the door."

They leaned against the wall and listened. Till now Lander had heard nothing. With his ear to the wall he fancied he caught the sound of soft footsteps stealing to the door. Papa Clair caught him by the ear and dragged down his head and murmured:

"There are twelve or more—only six apiece. I hear some still coming up the stairs. When they come in keep behind me. We must get into the hall and put out the light."

"We can go down the back way."

"Much better. I see your head is clear. They will be sure to have men posted at the bottom of the front stairs. Now be ready."

An audible shuffling outside the door heralded

the coming attack. There followed a few seconds of silence; then Lander jumped spasmodically as a volley of heavy balls riddled the panels of the door, smashed in the wall beyond and shattered the window. With the discharge of firearms there came a rush of heavy bodies against the none-too-strong door, and in swept the mob of professional killers. The one light in the hall burned dimly and was at the top of the stairs some twenty feet away. It barely dispelled the thick gloom of the room.

The first two men in were now at the bed, stabbing furiously. One man wheeled and blundered into the couple crouching behind the door waiting for a chance to dart into the hall. The blunderer screamed and fell writhing to the floor. Papa Clair dived into the group, horribly active and efficient. Lander with his rifle in one hand and knife in the other kept behind him.

Instantly the room was choked with yells and curses. Blows were showered on the two at random, and Lander's upraised rifle proved an excellent buckler. Some of the blows, blindly bestowed, fell on the intruders. Pistols were discharged at close range, but the darkness of the room prevented accuracy of execution.

Neither Clair nor Lander had time to distinguish individuals. With their eyes more accustomed to the darkness they made out a frantic mass of milling men, and thrust their knives at random where they found their way blocked by the surging bodies.

"To the door!" yelled Lander to recall Papa Clair from his Berserk rage.

The old man remembered their purpose was to escape and shifted his advance, swinging his knife in an arc before him and leaving it for his pupil to guard the flanks. When first precipitated into the conflict Lander was heart-sick at the thought of bloodshed; now he was committed to it. Once he had heard the grunts of the two stabbing the empty bed, he knew only one sensation, to hack his way clear of the beasts who for a few pieces of silver had come to murder an inoffensive stranger.

Cursing and screaming, the hired assassins found their very numbers blocking them. Then one voice rose above the hubbub, yelling:

"That ol' devil of a Clair's here! Look out fer that knife!"

"In your throat!" shrilly cried Papa Clair, and he seemed to straighten out in mid-air, his knife-

point darting an incredible distance. His traducer went down, choking and coughing.

Lander brought his knife back in a wide slash that sent the crowding assailants reeling back for a moment, and with a rush carried Papa through the door and to the head of the stairs. After them came those still able to walk. With a swing of his rifle he knocked the light to the floor and the hall was in darkness.

Papa turned to renew the fight but, putting up his knife, Lander swept him from his feet and carried him down the hall. The desperadoes took it for granted their quarry had descended the main stairs to the street, and they called for the lookout at the outer door to stop them. As they rushed down the stairs Lander sighed in relief and led the way down the rear stairs.

"Bridger was right," said Lander as they stole through the dark streets. "Tilton and his gang will never be satisfied until they get me."

"The more so, my friend, because *M'sieu* Bridger appeared in the affair as your champion. Yes, you must go. . . . But life stops for old Papa Clair after you've gone. Yet behold, you should have gone before. The time for wooing is after the long trail has been covered, when your buck-

skin garments are so worn no one can tell what they are made of. To come back and say: 'I have seen life. I have lived and fought my way among men and savages.' Ah, that is the speech that makes *m'm'selle* very proud. A woman likes to discover things in the man she loves, not to know him as we know the way from here to *Petite Côte*. Her love is like an old mountain man—always hungry for something new."

"Eighteen months!" muttered Lander, more to himself than to Papa Clair.

"The months will pass. Come snow, go snow. What profit could you squeeze out of them if you stayed here and worked in a store?

"Life is a bag of months. Fortune is what a man squeezes out of them. To get his satisfy he must squeeze each month very hard. If he can't get love he gets gold. If neither love nor gold he can at least get red-blooded life. Fortune may play tricks with him; *m'm'selle* may turn from him, but life, real and burning, can always be his."

"Yes, yes; of course," mumbled Lander, in a poor mood for the comforts of philosophy. "Now you must leave me. Deliver the letter to Susette in the morning. I must hurry to Bridger's store and get the mule."

"The little lady shall have the letter early in the morning. Do not doubt it. My friend, always wear my knife and scabbard. Do not, unless hard pressed by several, uncover yourself with those wide, slashing movements you used in the room. Keep behind the point, and God bless you."

Instead of taking Lander's outstretched hand he seized him by the shoulders and kissed him on both cheeks.

Lander almost winced in his surprise, then remembered the Frenchman's emotional nature, also his ferocity as a fighting man, and for the first time during the day found himself thinking of some one besides himself and Susette. The slight, frail figure and the snowy hair contrasted vividly with the indomitable will and high heart. He realized he had been Papa Clair's only intimate, perhaps the only close friend the old man had known for many years.

"Good-by, Papa. God knows I am grateful for all you've done for me. Sometime we'll meet again."

"A year and a half will go quicker for an old man than for youth waiting for his sweetheart. I shall be here, looking for you when the men

come back from the mountains.... Remember and keep behind the point, I shall think of you much.... Only clumsy fools try to see how much blood they can let loose with a knife with their cutting and slashing."

There was more, but he had turned away and the words were lost in his throat.

Lander, too, felt very lonely as he made for the Washington Avenue store. He found the mule hitched at the rear of the dark building. Mounting and holding his rifle ready to repulse any attack, he rode to the plain back of the city and swung into the north for his dash to St. Charles.

CHAPTER IV

THE BATTLE OF THE BULLIES

THE hamlet of St. Charles was lazily bestirring itself along its one straggling street when Lander rode his tired mule down to the river and signaled for the ferry-man to come and take him across. After some delay the man showed up and with much mumbling and grumbling set his passenger and the mule across.

Passing down the one street Lander followed the shore till he came to a seventy-five-foot keel-boat, the cargo box filling the body with the exception of some ten feet at each end. The thousand feet of towing rope was coiled in the bow as the steamer from St. Louis would arrive during the day and tow it as far as Lexington. From there Bridger's boatman under the crisp direction of Etienne Prevost would cordelle and pole it to Fort Pierre, near the mouth of the Teton, or Bad River. Once they got above the

mouth of the James the boating would be easier than on the lower river.

Lander was decided to stick to the boat as the long reaches of the mighty stream fascinated him. In the fall of the previous year Kenneth McKenzie, the greatest trader ever employed by the A. F. C., whose name will always be associated with the Upper Missouri outfit stationed at Fort Union above the Yellowstone, wrote to the New York headquarters of the company that the steamboat "would permit of their keeping their men in the Indian country and paying the greater part of their wages in merchandise instead of in cash." In other words the company planned to pay wages in merchandise at three and four hundred per cent. advance on the cost. Lander had heard this plan talked over at the store and might have hesitated to go up-river as an *engagé* for the company. But going by boat up-river to Fort Pierre and ultimately joining Bridger in the mountains was a different proposition and his soul kindled to it.

Could he have but known it Lander was two years inside the beginning of that period of invasion of the great trans-Mississippi territory. Of course there had been journeyings to the moun-

tains and back and several government exploring parties prior to 1829. There also had grown up a brisk trade with Santa Fé. But the epoch of great travel was made possible by the coming of steam to the Missouri as a permanent factor in 1829.

The New Englanders required two hundred years to reach the Mississippi. Even at that they passed through immense areas without pausing to explore thoroughly, let alone settle them. Yet within eighteen years from the morning Lander rode his borrowed mule into sleepy St. Charles, the steamboat on the Missouri was to be responsible for a quarter of a million square miles of the Oregon country being settled. Within the same period more than half a million square miles were to be sliced off from Mexico, with Americans occupying a thousand miles of the Pacific coast. This expansion was even to surpass the overrunning of Europe by eastern hordes.

Lander tarried by the boat although the mountain men and boatmen were camped near by. Two thoughts now popped into his mind, and neither had to do with migrations: his love for Susette and a commercial inspiration. Although a mountain man only in embryo he had no vision

of a mighty people flooding the West. If he became a mountain man a settled condition would be the last destiny he would wish for his country. Trappers were one with the Indians in wishing the land to remain as it was with wild life flourishing and multiplying.

Lander thought tenderly of Susette, then jumped from his mule to examine the keelboat more critically and to wonder why such craft must be made in Cincinnati, Louisville or Pittsburgh. It now came home to him that had he not mixed up in the duel and killed his man he might have secured a little capital and from his own "navy yard" turned out keelboats and taken a rare profit.

"But if not for the fight I'd probably hung round town, somebody's hired man," he morosely told himself as he led his mule over the slight ridge to where Bridger's men were camped.

A chorus of yells accelerated his pace and he soon beheld some twenty men singing and dancing around their morning fires while nearly as many more were crawling from their blankets and cursing the hilarity of their mates. A slim, wiry-built man walked among them, counting off on his fingers to check them up.

"Where is Long Simons? Is the fool still in St. Louis? Then he stays there, and we shall have to elect a new bully for this trip," remarked the slim man.

"Bah! That Long Simons don't rare on his hind-legs when I go by," growled a big hulk of a fellow.

"Ye never did go fo' to give him no battle, Porker," drawled a lazy southern voice, and a young man with deep marks of dissipation on his face raised himself from his blankets and threw back his long black hair.

"I'll give ye a battle, ye whelp!" roared Porker, rushing at the prostrate youth.

The other came to his feet like a cat, a knife flashing in his hand, his white teeth gleaming wolfishly.

"Hold, hold! I, Etienne Prevost, will shoot the man who makes the first move." And Lander knew he was gazing at a celebrated mountain man, one of the galaxy which had graduated under Ashley while a mere youth. "You shall all have a chance to show your mettle. We'll settle the question before we start. The red belt is in my pack; but no knife-play. Hunter, put up that knife."

"Go to ——!" snarled Hunter, bending half double and beginning to circle about the mighty Porker who now showed signs of fear.

"Put up that knife, you fool! Haven't you sweat the rum out of you yet?" cried Prevost.

With a snarl Hunter ducked forward. Porker turned to run and secure a weapon and sprawled on his face. Hunter was astride of him in a second with the knife raised. Lander felt his stomach revolting at the sight of murder all but committed. Then Prevost fired, and with a yelp of pain and rage Hunter tottered to his feet, clasp ing his right wrist.

"Go back to St. Louis, you trouble-maker. Go join the A. F. C. We don't want you," coldly advised Prevost as he began reloading his pistol.

"Etienne Prevost, I'll kill you for this," screamed Hunter.

"Mebbe. But go back to St. Louis and wait for your broken wrist to mend. If you will come with me I'll fix it up until you can get treated in town."

"If I step aside with you it'll be fo' to knife you with my left hand," gritted Hunter, tying his handkerchief around his neck for a sling and walking away.

"Good riddance!" growled Prevost. Then he turned and beheld Lander staring wide-eyed on the scene.

"Who are you? What do you want?" Prevost roughly demanded, walking up to him and surveying him sharply. "You don't belong to this outfit."

"Mr. Bridger sent me here to join it," explained Lander. "Said I could go with the boat or with the land party at Lexington."

"Who are you?"

Lander told him and added that he had been employed by the A. F. C. until the day before.

"If Jim Bridger knew that he never would 'a' sent you. We don't want any A. F. C. spies with us."

The men began crowding forward ominously. One man suggested they duck him in the river. Another advised tying him to his mule and driving the animal into the river. Lander laid his rifle across the saddle and reaching down pulled his knife from his boot.

"I may not be very welcome here," he said. "But some one is going to get killed before I'm ducked or tied to any mule."

Porker, who now recovered something of his

former aplomb and fearing he had lost caste because of his mishap with Hunter, swaggered forward with a camp-ax in his hand and loudly called out:

"Ev'ry one step aside. I'll cut this young rooster's comb. . . . Gawdfrey!"

He came to an abrupt halt and rubbed his chin and grinned foolishly. To Prevost he explained:

"This hyar younker is th' one what did for Mal Phinny of th' A. F. C. outfit. Killed him las' night in a fight on Bloody Island. All St. Louis heard about it just as I was leavin' Tilton's bar to git here on time."

"Then he done a mighty good job. Wish he'd done for ol' Parker," shouted one of the men, relaxing into a peaceful attitude. "If ye done that Malcom skunk ye needn't bother to keep yer gun p'inted this way, Mister Doolest."

"Jim Bridger know about the fight?" inquired Prevost, his voice shading off into courtesy.

"He gave the word for us to fire," replied Lander without shifting his rifle or relaxing his watchfulness.

"Then we've had enough of this hoss-play," said Prevost. "S'long as Bridger sent you, then you must belong. But I want to say right now

that there's altogether too much cock-a-doodle-dooing here to suit me. I reckon you all need to be blooded a bit. I ain't heard nothing for forty-eight hours except fighting talk. We've just about time to settle this business before the steamboat gits here. One of you is best man and is to carry the pipe and wear the bully's red belt. Hurry up and put your weapons one side. Keelboat style, except biting and eye-gouging. Every man who's shot off his yawp is going to be licked or be a champion."

Lander restored the knife to his boot, dropped the rifle in the hollow of his arm and said:

"You can count me out. I ain't any hankering to wear your red belt."

"You'll fight when it comes your turn," Prevost coldly warned. "I never started for the mountains yet without first gitting all the bile out of a man's system. And you're too quick to stand folks off with guns and knives. Right now, before the steamer comes, we're going to decide who's who for this whole trip. Porker, seeing as you're 'lowed to be champion in place of Long Simons——"

"Whoopee!" bawled a heavy voice back in the village street.

The group turned and beheld a rangy-built man riding toward them on a vicious-looking mule. The newcomer waved his arms and loudly announced:

"Here I be. More 'gator than man. Stronger'n a buf'ler in a pushin' match. Hungry as a grizzly for a huggin' match. I've got panther blood in my body, an' th' teeth of a mountain lion. I've come to hurt somebody powerful bad. I wore th' red belt to th' mountains on th' last trip, an' I'll wear it again."

Porker stared at him uneasily, then brightened as he observed the champion was swerving from side to side as if half drunk.

"So you did manage to make it, eh?" growled Prevost. "A little more and it would have been your last trip with the Rocky Mountain Fur outfit."

"Ye couldn't keep me back any more'n yer bare hands could hold a buf'ler bull back from water," drunkenly boasted Long Simons, dismounting and standing unsteadily. "I'd 'a' been here sooner but I met Hunter who'd had trouble with his arm. Stopped to fix his sling for him. He hit for St. Louis, leavin' a trail o' brimstun an' sulfur behind him. Boss, don't tell me th' red

belt's been fit for an' won. If it has I'll scrunch th' man that has it."

"You're in time," snapped Prevost. "That's more'n I can say of your condition."

He then counted the men and found the tally satisfactory. The question of physical superiority was usually settled and the red belt awarded at the start of the trip. This absorbed the fighting spirit of the men and allowed them to stick to their work without bickerings. With Prevost these annual battles meant more efficiency during the long trip to the mountains and back, a sort of clearing-house for distemper and private feuds. Glancing over the company he said:

"As it seems to lay between Long Simons and Porker you other boys can git ready and find out who's the two best among you. Hurry it along. 'Any feller showing the white feather will be booted into the river. 'All belts and weapons back there by my tent. No biting or eye-digging. No bone-breaking after a man's beat."

Lander had heard of these contests but had never been brought face to face with the facts. His eyes opened widely as two men clinched the minute Prevost ceased speaking and rolled over the grass fighting like tiger cats. Obviously

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there was bad blood between the two and they had waited hungrily until the boss gave the word; now fought to hurt, to maim, all but to kill.

Lander had seen street fights in St. Louis but none that were so cold-bloodedly ferocious as this. It impressed him as being more deadly than an exchange of shots on Bloody Island. As he followed the wheel of legs and arms another couple fell to.

In this abrupt fashion, with no preliminaries to gloss the proceedings, those men who had antipathies to settle immediately came to blows and clinches. Then more slowly followed those who had no grievances to settle. Once committed to battle the latter quickly discovered their blood was hot and responded to the primitive lust.

Inside of ten minutes only Prevost, Long Simons, Porker and Lander were left standing. It was brutal work. Prevost glided among the combatants, pulling one off his man to prevent murder, urging another to a greater resistance, kicking a jaw that was endeavoring to bite into a bronzed neck, stabilizing the *mêlée* so his loss of man-power would be the minimum and involve nothing more serious than a broken bone.

After twenty minutes the defeated were crawl-

ing or staggering to the river to wash their wounds, and the victors were panting and eying one another wolfishly.

"Ten minutes' rest, then you what's left double up and go at it," ruled Prevost.

"I'll take on this new feller," spoke up one of the victors, and he leered malevolently at Lander.

"He's your meat," promptly ruled Prevost. "First come, first served." It was an old game for him, this umpiring of forty fighting men all in action at the same time. He supervised it with the same precision and unconcern he would exhibit in tying up a pack of beaver.

"But I don't hanker to figure as a champion," said Lander.

"Ye won't be no champion, or anywhere near it," chuckled the man who had challenged him. "Don't ye fret any."

Prevost's thin face wrinkled in disgust as he turned on Lander.

"If that's your style, if you're afeared of a little scrimmage among your friends, you ain't no man to go into the Blackfoot country, not even if Jim Bridger did send you," he grunted. "Hook on to Rummy there or hit the trail for St. Louis."

Lander felt a sudden rage boiling up in his heart against the leering Rummy. The brutality of the spectacle coming on top of the duel and the night's hard ride had sapped his fighting spirit. But Prevost's disdain was a spur that dug him cruelly. While the time-honored custom of fighting the fight out of the men was a sound one he could not see how it should apply to him, a stranger, who had evidenced no desire to bully any one.

"Time's up! Make it sharp!" ordered Prevost.

The man called Rummy grinned exultingly, revealing several blanks where front teeth had been, and dived into Lander before the latter could set himself. At first Lander was propelled backward and with difficulty kept his feet. Prevost watched him with contempt. Then he caught his balance, dug a heel into the sward and brought Rummy's rush to an abrupt halt. The man instantly shifted his hold and had him by the throat. Almost as quick Lander's two hands shot up inside his opponent's arms and with an outward fling easily broke the hold and began hammering his man unmercifully.

Rummy had scant knowledge of fisticuffs and, like most of his mates, depended on close quar-

ters for success, his technique consisting of kicking, choking and bone-breaking.

With a terrific smack Lander's left caught him between the eyes and jolted the thick head back. Rummy grunted and shook his head and gamely bored in again.

With a swinging upper-cut Lander's right went to his jaw, straightening him out in the air. When he struck the turf he remained very quiet.

"This is all foolishness!" Lander fumed at Prevost.

Prevost smiled crookedly, his eyes twinkling.

"It's the kind of foolishness that keeps you from digging back to St. Louis where they might make it hot for you along of what you done to a' A. F. C. man," he said.

There had been five couples in the last bout, and Lander and his man had been the first to finish.

"Pretty nifty work, younker," chuckled Long Simons. "But ye can pound my head all day without botherin' me any, less ye git so tarnal careless as to bust my pipe. *Then* I would git mad."

Prevost leaped among the fighters and pulled a couple apart and warned:

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"That's enough. You two been chewing each other. If I see any more biting I'll spoil the biter's teeth for good."

The two got to their feet, both claiming the victory. Prevost motioned them to retire, saying, "Neither of you is any good." Turning to the remaining three couples he soon had the winners standing apart; these with Lander made four survivors from the mill.

"Send 'em along. I'm gittin' sleepy from waitin'," growled Porker.

"Ye big hog!" snorted Long Simons. "Want to fight 'em when they can't toddle? Mister Prevost, some of 'em oughter be matched ag'in' us two now afore they git any tired."

"Shut up," snapped Prevost. Then to the four men: "Match up. The winners go against Porker and Simons."

"I'll take this A. F. C. killer," promptly spoke up a man with long sandy mustaches and light blue eyes. The other two instantly fell upon each other.

Lander's challenger stepped backward, saying:

"Let's have plenty of room to operate in, young feller. Seein' as how ye fight a new-fangled way I don't want to be crowded."

Lander felt no hostility toward this chap. The sandy hair and blue eyes and grinning mouth suggested good nature. He held his hands ready to foil a rush, and as Prevost became busy overseeing the other couple he took time to murmur:

"D'ye want to fight that Porker or Long Simons?"

"I'll fight anything," coldly answered Lander, striking a pawing hand aside.

"Wal, I won't." The confession was accompanied by a chuckle. "So ye needn't be hoggish in mountin' me, for ye're goin' to win mighty easy."

As he said this he deftly secured a grip on Lander's right wrist, dodged a drive of the left, and closed in. With both arms about Lander's waist and his head burrowing into his chest he proceeded to give a demonstration of striving to lift Lander off his feet. For a few moments Lander feared being thrown and struggled viciously, using his left against the head with short-armed jabs.

"What'n —— ye tryin' to do?" came the muffled query. "Tryin' to git me mad? I ain't hurtin' ye any, be I?"

Then Lander realized his opponent was con-

tent to cling to him. With a sour grin Lander accepted the proposition and displayed great activity in swirling about. Once they went down with Lander underneath, but the other dexterously threw himself on his side, and with a spurt of strength pulled Lander on top. Then with a groan he relaxed his hold and lay still.

Lander got to his feet and stared in dismay. He had played the other fellow's game, yet by some accident the man was unconscious, or worse. Picking up a camp kettle Lander ran to the river and brought water and doused it over the silent figure.

"Young man, you git 'em quick. No doubt about that," called out Prevost.

Lander threw more water. With the celerity of a Jack-in-the-box the man bobbed to a sitting posture and cunningly winked an eye. In deep relief Lander dropped the kettle. Prevost was calling out:

"New man wins. Perkins wins. Rest up and go against Simons and Porker."

Lander was still fresh, but for the sake of the quitter's good name he simulated fatigue and took time to study Porker. The man was so named because of his bulk. To grapple with him

would be useless as the man's sheer weight would carry any ordinary antagonist down to defeat. Nor did Lander believe his sturdiest blows could register any effect on the round, shaggy head. He eyed the waistline speculatively. That man's abdomen was laced with muscles built up during long mountain trips. So far as Lander could perceive there was no vulnerable point, neither jaw nor wind. But because of the man's height he decided to play for the wind.

"Do you feel fit?" Prevost kindly inquired after ten minutes had elapsed.

Lander nodded and stepped quickly forward to meet Porker. The latter eyed him sardonically and waited for him to come within reach, and then flung out his flail of a hand. Lander passed under it and drove his right into the pit of the bully's stomach, and as he delivered the blow he realized he was adapting the pose of a knife-fighter, and he remembered Papa Clair's parting advice to "keep behind the point."

The blow resounded loudly and drove a grunt from Porker. Some of the men set up a cheer but Lander felt the resilient muscles give and come back under his fist and knew that mode of attack was as useless as to beat a buffalo with the

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bare hands. He was out of reach of the long arms and circling about for another jab almost before Porker knew he had been hit.

Porker's eyes grew lurid. His pride was hurt.

"Ye bug!" he roared. "Tryin' to make fun o' me, eh? Wal, I'll l'arn ye from childhood up."

Simons had his man tucked comfortably away under one arm and was refraining from inflicting punishment. A wide grin cracked his face as he watched Lander.

"All he makes me think of is a knife-fighter," he bawled out, "an' he do make me think o' that most dingly. Hit him ag'in, ye weasel! Give him one in th' snoot!"

Lander maneuvered warily, his left hand out at one side, his right hand advanced with the elbow almost touching the hip. Porker lurched toward him, vilely berating him for running away after "takin' a man by s'prise." Lander evaded the clawing hands and sent his right under the chin just as he would have lunged with the point, with his whole body behind the blow. The massive jaw might be impervious to the bare fist, just as the strongly muscled abdomen could ignore anything short of a mule's kick, but as he happened

to be holding his tongue between his teeth he bit it cruelly.

"Curse you!" he roared, spitting blood and rushing frantically to grapple his tormentor.

"Bully for ye, younker! Bleed him some more! Lawd, a big fool like that lettin' a child lick him!" howled Long Simons, shaking his man up and down in a paroxysm of joy.

"Wait'll I git my hooks into ye!" snarled Porker.

Lander swung both fists, the double *smack* landing on nose and eye. The nose began to bleed and the eye grew puffy.

"Haw haw! I'm waitin'!" yelled Simons, letting his man drop to the ground and crawl away while he pounded his huge hands together in delight.

"Good fighting!" applauded Prevost.

But the contest was too unequal to continue in Lander's favor. His agility and audacity in taking the fight to Porker had dazed the bully and won a temporary advantage. He had a theory of offense that might have worked out successfully could he have kept clear of the madly swinging arms. The brawny throat was sensitive, he concluded. He proved it by leaping forward and

landing a stiff jab. No great damage was done yet Porker was taken with a fit of coughing, and could Lander have hammered in more blows on the throat it is possible he would have downed his man.

Porker now threw all discretion aside and rushed at his nimble adversary with the ferocity of a mad bull, swinging his long arms and ponderous fists in a thoroughly unscientific manner. It was useless to guard against such an onslaught. For a minute or two Lander ducked and dodged or slipped away, with no opportunity to take the offensive. Then he caught a buffet on the head that knocked him violently on to his back, the wind driven from his body. With a howl of triumph Porker jumped forward to stamp on him.

Prevost's pistol cracked and the lead fanned the infuriated man's face, and the leader's voice was warning: "Through your thick skull, Porker, if you don't pull up."

"He's my meat," gasped Porker, turning his bloody visage toward Prevost.

"I'll shoot you and stick you in a tree to dry if you don't come away. You won the fight. That's all."

"But he blooded me," protested Porker.

"Shucks! It ain't nothin' to what I'm goin' to do with ye once ye git over pumpin' for wind," bellowed Long Simons, lounging nearer, his ham-like hands held before him, half closed like a gorilla's, his huge shoulders sagging and rising.

With a husky bleat Porker turned to clinch him, but Simons waved him back, warning:

"Take yer time. Ye'll need lots of wind to buck ag'in' me. Git yer breath. I don't want no one sayin' I ran foul o' ye while ye was tuckered out. I've heard th' talk ye've been makin' an' I'm goin' to make ye eat yer words. This row atween ye 'n' me is goin' to be a real fight, I reckon."

Calmed by his realization of the desperate game ahead of him, and disquieted by observing that Simons seemed to have sobered off quite thoroughly, Porker walked to the river bank and splashed the cold water over his head and shoulders. Prevost helped Lander sit up and the sandy-haired chap who had quit brought water and bathed his head. For a minute Lander could not identify himself and stared foolishly at the rough men and wondered why they were so bruised and battered. They grinned at him sympathetically, and by degrees the details of the *fight* came back to him.

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Long Simons came up, his hairy face suggesting a grizzly bear learning to smile, and endorsed:

"Younker, yer shore some game-cock. When ye grow up ye'll be some fighter. Shake!"

Lander gave a limp hand, then glimpsed Porker reclining in the grass and hotly declared:

"I can kill him with a knife inside of sixty seconds."

"Did you kill Phinny with a knife?" dryly asked Prevost.

"With a pistol," was the faint answer; and the lust to kill deserted him.

"Being such a master hand for blood-lettin' you'll do fine to let loose in the Blackfoot country butcher-shop when we git there," Prevost ironically observed. "You also could murder Porker with a gun. You don't seem to understand that this is a friendly fight to see who shall wear the red belt. All bad blood is s'posed to be spilled right here. If you go to the mountains with me I don't want to hear any more threats against any of my men. Not even if you was Jim Bridger's brother."

Lander burned hotly under the rebuke. He recognized the justice of it and apologized.

"That crack over the head made me see red. I'm not looking to fight any one with a knife. I told you I didn't want to fight any of the men. I knew Porker would best me when I went against him. I just tried to make it a good one while it lasted."

"Said handsome enough to suit a Quaker," chuckled Prevost. "And you made it a good one and plenty more....Hi, Porker! How's the breathing?"

"Good!" growled Porker, clambering to his feet and pulling off his buckskin shirt and standing forth a hairy behemoth of a man. "An' if that child 'lows his little dancin' lesson with me was a good fight jest let him watch me chaw up Long Simons as easy as a 'gator chaws a puppy."

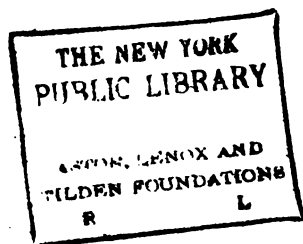
"Ye'd feel a heap better, Porky, if yer heart was ahind them bold words," said Long Simons laughingly as he peeled to the buff. "Now I'm comin' to make a call on ye."

"Th' latch-string is out!"

With monstrous impact they crashed together; and Lander forgot his aching head in watching the two Titans. Their barrel-like chests came together until it did not seem that bone and sinew could withstand the shock. Then they secured



With monstrous impact they came together.



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grips and scarcely moving their feet began straining and lifting and pulling, seeking an advantage whereby an arm would snap or a muscle tear loose. They were primitive forces, eschewing all man-made rules except the embargo laid down by Prevost.

The boss watched them anxiously, fearful of losing the services of one, and yet knowing the two must fight it out now or be fighting later on, and fighting perhaps with something besides their bare strength.

Evenly matched in weight and seemingly of equal strength and experience, there seemed no choice between them at first. But as they slowly revolved about and Lander saw the wide, contented grin on Simon's face and the deep scowl on Porker's brow he wisely suspected the former was very confident and that the latter was much worried. At that, within the first minute Porker got his man at a decided disadvantage, and had he not lusted too prematurely to end it then and there he might have scored a triumph. But he worked too hard and fast and within another minute the odds vanished and they were breast to breast again.

The struggle both sickened and fascinated Lan-

der. On the faces of the other men he beheld only a breathless interest. Observing the expression on Lander's face Prevost smiled grimly and said:

"The man who has the guts to go after beaver where we're going looks on this rassling as just play. You think they'll kill each other. No such thing. They'll maul and pound each other, and if I wasn't here they'd bite and claw each other. Worst that can come of it is a bu'sted leg or arm, and one of them out of it for the season. That's all that worries me."

He was interrupted by a mighty *spank!* Porker had loosed a hand and had dealt Long Simons a terrific clout on the head. Simons' head rocked back, and Porker, with visions of a clear title to the red belt, gave a whoop and sought to follow up his advantage. Then Simons' apish arms closed about him.

There followed a convulsive struggle, Porker tearing at his opponent's bearded face to force him to release his crushing hold. Then a moment of weakening, and Porker found himself over his opponent's hip. The next moment he crashed headlong to the ground and lay there insensible.

Throwing back his shoulders Long Simons

flapped his arms and sounded the cock's crow of triumph. Prevost examined the unconscious man, then curtly announced:

"He'll do. Nothing broken. The red belt is yours for another trip, Simons. That is, unless this newcomer wants a try for it."

He pointed toward the village, where a man on a mule was quitting the street to ride toward the camp.

"Papa Clair!" cried Lander. "Lord! What does he want here? And riding so fast." And a nameless chill gripped his heart as he watched the old man flog the mule to greater efforts.

"There comes th' steamboat! See her smoke below th' bend!" excitedly yelled Rummy.

CHAPTER V

PINAUD, THE HUNTER

AS Papa Clair rode he kept his head turned to watch the smoke below the bend. Prevost remarked that it "looked like a race with the steamboat, with the mule a winner."

"It's something about me," said Lander uneasily. "Probably about my duel with Phinny."

"Then the boat has something to do with it," said Prevost. "Clair has come hard and fast to beat it out. The A. F. C. may be sending to catch you."

"Can they take me here?" Lander anxiously inquired.

"If they're strong enough. But if they've come to take you it ain't because you fought a duel. Duels are natural as sleep. It's 'cause you wiped out a' A. F. C. man who was a friend of old Hurry-Up Parker. Now we'll know."

The last as Papa Clair's mule came to a stag-

gering halt a hundred yards away. Clair was afoot with the quickness of a cat and running toward the curious group.

"My friend," he called out on beholding Lander. "Holy blue! What has happened to you? You have the bruise, the scratch! Your raiment is torn."

"Nothing, nothing, Papa Clair. What brings you here?" replied Lander.

"Imbecile that I am! 'Armed men are on the boat to get you. We must ride at once."

"How many? I reckon we can stand them off," spoke up Prevost.

"No, no. There must be no trouble between the A. F. C. and the Rocky Mountain Fur Company—at least, not in Missouri. We must go. You must know nothing about us. And we must ride quick!"

"Then you must have a fresh mule, Etienne Clair," said Prevost.

"A thousand thanks for the same, *M'sieu* Prevost."

"Simons, rush up two mules," was the sharp order.

The champion did as bid but remonstrated:

"No need o' runnin'. If thar's any trouble

along o' that boat I reckon we can smooth it down."

"At Lexington, but not here at St. Charles. Put him on the trail for Lexington, Papa. He can follow the river close enough to see when the boat has passed. He can hold back when he reaches Lexington until sure the steamer has gone and the men with it. If the men stay with us to trap him I'll send some one down the trail to warn him. Now be off. She'll be poking her head round the bend in another minute."

With his mind in a whirl Lander took his rifle, mounted the mule and followed Papa Clair up the river, keeping under cover of a fringe of cottonwoods and willows. The two men covered some five or six miles, exchanging scarcely a word. Then Clair pulled up on the edge of a wooded terrace that gave a view of the river and quietly remarked:

"Now to wait for the steamer to go by. *Fumez la pipe*. The men on the boat must stick to the boat as they haven't any horses or mules and Prevost won't lend them any."

"What does it all mean?" demanded Lander.

"It was after I left you, my friend. I did not feel to sleep," Papa Clair began, speaking be-

tween puffs as his pipe balked a bit. "I walked down to the levee, thinking that perhaps some of your visitors would be waiting to get their satisfy from me. I heard a man say the *Golden Queen* would start at three o'clock. I found the boat and watched the freight go aboard. Steam was up. They would be leaving soon. Then as I stood behind a pile of barrels armed men passed through the light of the basket-torch. They were not trappers nor traders. I recognized Dillings among them. I knew it meant mischief.

"I stole close to the guards and heard talk. They spoke of you. One said they would be sure to pick you up at St. Charles, that they must get you before you got out of the state. That was enough for me. I went to the Parker house on Pine Street and woke a negro in back and gave him money and your letter; and I told him to give it to *m'm'selle* early in the morning and to let no one see him. Then I placed my knife at his throat and promised to come back and cut off his head if he failed to do as I told him. He said he would sit up all night to be sure to give it to her early. Then to my room, then a mule, and here we are."

"You've come far enough out of your way,

Papa. 'After the boat passes you must start back," said Lander with a sigh in his voice.

"Name of heaven! Go back and leave you to be captured perhaps at Lexington? You slander me!"

"Bridger's men won't let them take me."

"They will have a writing from the court. If Bridger stops them, then the 'A. F. C. will make it warm for his company, perhaps try to take away his license. No, no! We must not let *M'sieu* Bridger have trouble over it."

"I'd rather have you with me than a thousand mountain men, but it's my trouble."

"I am here, Etienne Clair. I went to my room and brought this." He held up a long heavy package securely wrapped in buckskin. "I have come to stay. Not only to Lexington, eight days away, but to the mountains. By the grace of God I will see what truth there is in the cooking-springs and caves of war-paint. See these!"

He unwrapped the package and disclosed three long scabbards, one of his dearly beloved knives in each. With the one in his boot he had four. He proceeded to fasten the three blades to his belt, saying as he did so:

"They are all I had to bring. They would

have wept had I left them behind. Had I taken one the other three would have been jealous. 'Ah, they are very sensitive, these little ones of mine. See how bright the blade shines because it goes to the fountain!'

He pulled a knife and held it up to mirror the sun.

Immensely heartened by his friend's presence Lander did not have the courage to insist on the old man's returning. He had been homesick without knowing what was the matter with him. The girl tugged at his heart and kept his thoughts turned to St. Louis. The mountain men were all strangers and exceedingly rough in their ways. He did not fear physical danger, but the fighting and carousing sickened him.

"I ought not to admit it," he mused. "Yet I was feeling very lonesome until you came."

With a rare smile lighting his wrinkled face Papa Clair replied:

"It is very good of *m'sieu* to allow. Now to business. We brought no supplies. Take your rifle and scout the bottoms. I will see if can find *M'sieu* Rabbit or Madame Turkey."

They hitched their mules and separated, Papa Clair taking only his knives.

On rejoining each other thirty minutes later Lander held up his empty hands and looked his disgust. Papa Clair held up a turkey he had killed with his knife.

Having eaten and saved what was left of the turkey they resumed their flight. Their back trail concerned them none as they knew the men would not attempt to follow them afoot. They progressed leisurely, thinking to hold back until the boat passed them. As it was impracticable to follow the river closely, owing to the high water, they were continually riding across the bends, making their mileage much less than that of the boat. At times they drew back a considerable distance from the river and could not know whether or not the boat had passed in the meantime.

For two days they advanced to glimpse the broad and muddy stream and as often retreated, or were driven back by natural obstacles, without sighting the *Golden Queen*. Lander was convinced the boat was ahead of them. Papa Clair, observing the unusual number of snags and drift in the river, and knowing the boat would not attempt to run after dark, shook his head.

On the third day they started late and crossed

a deep bend. They approached the river along some low bluffs and were able to draw close to the river. They were out of food and had eaten nothing since the noon before.

As they stopd and stared out on the mighty desolation Lander forgot his hunger. It was his first trip up the Missouri. Here was a primitive monster eternally gnawing away at the banks, swallowing acres at a mouthful, writhing back and forth and forever shifting its serpentine course. The implacable waters were dotted thickly with drifting trees, fresh victims to its insatiate hunger, and ancient wreckage discarded in past seasons and now retrieved briefly to serve as a plaything.

Inshore were many deadly snags and sawyers. One of the latter, almost below them, deceived Lander at first into believing it was some aquatic monster. It raised its ragged spear of a trunk under the impulse of the current, then furtively sank from sight. A count of ten and it cautiously appeared, then vanished. Papa Clair smiled and briefly named it.

"Lord! But it does seem as if it knew what it's about," said Lander.

"They are worse than snags," said Papa.

"Take one that saws up and down more slowly and a steamer at the bend will see clear water and have time to get above it before it comes up. Then, *peste!* It rips out the bottom."

Regardless of snags and sawyers the steamboat faced two big problems—food and huge amounts of fuel. It was the need of the latter that nearly led the two fugitives into the hands of the enemy.

From the bluff it was impossible to see the edge of the river at their feet. Thinking to find a turkey or deer they left their mules and slid down the clay banks and came to a thick grove of cottonwoods. They were advancing through this, with never a thought of danger, when a voice profanely bawling out brought them to a halt.

Dropping to the wet ground they crept forward to the edge of the growth and were astounded to behold the *Golden Queen* moored to a wood-yard. Her boilers were dead and no smoke was issuing from her stacks. The mate was loudly haranguing and abusing the men who, busy as ants, were bringing wood aboard. In tow was Prevost's keelboat with two men aboard. Neither Prevost nor any of the mountain men were with the boat so far as the two comrades could discover. For-

ward on the steamer was a group of heavily armed men who seemed to have no work to do. Papa Clair glared at them and played with a knife.

"There is Dillings," whispered Lander. "See anything of Prevost on board?"

Papa shook his head, murmuring:

"Sent two of his boatmen with the keelboat. He and the men went with the mules by land. Hah, behold! It is Tilton. Bah! The cowards! He did not dare come to your room that night. They won't risk their hides where they think we have a chance to fight back."

Now the mate called a halt and gave rapid orders. Deserting the wood-yard the men swarmed along the shore and began salvaging huge drift logs.

"Wood's just been cut. It's too green," whispered Papa Clair. "The logs burn best. They've been laying up here for hours. If they had had a fire going the smoke would have warned us. As it is we are lucky not to fall into their hands. Wood-yards are easy to get at here; but up-country the Indians hide near them and rush the men sent ashore. More than one scalp has been taken that way."

Lander pressed Clair's arm, but the old man had seen and already was working back into the grove. The cause of his alarm was a tall, rangy figure in fringed buckskin and carrying a long rifle.

"Hunter for the boat," murmured Clair. "The crew are easy to fool, but if he should come back in here he would see our trail. We must go back to the mules at once."

They lost no time in ascending the bluffs, the man in buckskin looming in their inner vision as a possible nemesis.

"He'll go ashore about midnight," continued Papa Clair as they found their mules and moved back a bit. "The steamer will start with the first light and pick up what he kills and hangs in trees along the shore. Steam has made women of the river travelers. But behold, I remember when corn, coffee, pork and beans were good enough for any man three times a day. That was before steam came to the Missouri. And yes, back of those days when bear was easier to get than pork we used bear meat. It wasn't so many years ago that every one used bear oil for lard. Many the long dugout I've seen come down the river with the center bin filled with oil and covered with a

skin. Yes, and honey, too. Holy blue! But so many bee trees in the Missouri bottoms in those days. Fill the cargo-box full and off to town. *M'sieu* Boone's boys brought in much honey. No barrels, no casks then. And bear oil would go through a skin bag like water through a broken kettle. Ah, it makes me remember we are hungry, my friend. The tall hunter gives me a thought."

He led his mule farther back from the river, Lander following, impatient to learn if his thought tended to serve the food problem. Clair halted and gravely said:

"It is robbery I would lead you into. But what would you have when hungry and the belt set in an extra notch? One must eat when one starves even if one pays the shot to the devil for dining. May the tall hunter have much luck!" And he crossed himself devoutly.

Lander understood and with boyish zest was eager to play Papa Clair's game of larceny. They retired a quarter of a mile and were lucky enough to stumble upon a turkey which they dressed and broiled over dry twigs.

By the time they had eaten, long pennons of black smoke streamed high above the top of the

wooded bluffs and they knew the boat was once more fighting its way against the current. They stalked it until it tied up for the night, then pressed on ahead a mile and secured their mules well back from the shore.

With the first streak of light they were scouting along the grove and were soon rewarded by the crack of a rifle.

"He's bagged something!" exulted Lander.

"May God be good to him in his hunting!" piously muttered Papa Clair. "The devil sent this high water to drown out the game. Turkey does not fill me. I want red meat."

Maneuvering down to the bank Clair struck the hunter's trail and followed it until they came to a small deer hung up in a tree where it could be plainly discovered from the boat. 'A' volume of smoke down-stream tarnishing the glory of the morning sun marked the coming of the *Golden Queen*. The two adventurers now heard the hunter's rifle speak again some distance ahead.

The deer was removed from the tree, carried back into the woods and butchered. Loaded with the meat they scrambled up the slope and located their mules. They struck due north for several miles before daring to halt and make camp.

Hastily broiling some steaks they satisfied their enormous appetites and rode west, swinging down toward the river as the sun touched the horizon. They were at the neck of a bend, and cutting across this they beheld the *Golden Queen* working inshore through the many snags.

The voices of the crew and passengers could be plainly heard. Papa Clair pointed out a man on the upper deck and informed:

"It is his work to watch for the game the hunter hangs up on the bank. The hunter has had poor luck, making his kills far apart. When game is plenty he will be back on board by ten o'clock in the morning with the rest of the day for sleep and playing the gentleman. He can not be asked to do any work of any kind. Once I was hunter for a keelboat. But that was far different."

Now the lookout cupped his mouth and bawled out, "Ducks on th' starboard bow!"

Clair chuckled softly and whispered:

"The tall hunter will be very angry when he goes aboard and does not find the deer. The lookout man will be blamed and that will make him angry. Now we can go back. There is a big bend for us to cut across to-morrow."

That night they ate as only a borderer can eat after being half-starved for days. Lander was amazed at the portions of meat he devoured. At dawn they were on their way, keeping wide of the river until Papa Clair decided they were near the bend, when they bore south again. Papa Clair should have sensed the possibility of others choosing to walk across the bend, even as he and Lander were doing. Apparently he did not give the matter a thought, and Lander was too green to the country to think of it.

The two fared pleasantly, having eaten heartily, with Papa in a boy's mood and regaling his companion with many stories of the upper country. It was seldom he mentioned those periods of his life spent on the lower Mississippi, in and around New Orleans.

"Call this a bend," he scoffed. "Wait till you go round the Great Bend, thirty miles by boat and only a mile and a half across by land. Before the steamboat it was hard for river men. Last year when Jedediah Smith took some Rocky Mountain Fur men with loaded wagons to the Rockies by way of the Platte and Sweetwater he showed what one could do by land travel. *M'sieu* Bridger says he could have taken the

wagons over the mountains by South Pass with no trouble."

"Wish I'd gone with that outfit. I'd know something about the mountains by this time," lamented Lander.

"It's not too late to learn if the A. F. C. don't get you before you get started," Papa comforted. "All their posts can be reached by water and they have no love for land travel. When *M'sieu* Ashley plunged into the mountains and set his men to trapping instead of using the Indians he made the A. F. C. open its eyes and grow very angry. The A. F. C. has more influence among the Indians than the government's Indian Department. There's no law beyond Fort Leavenworth except what you make and enforce yourself. To build posts in opposition is sorry business for the independent trader. He is undersold and discouraged and tricked in a hundred ways. The Indians do not believe the new man can last for more than a season and so they stick to the A. F. C."

"Stick so long as the liquor holds out," laughed Lander. "Fort Union was always sending word by express that they must have liquor."

"Ah, but those A. F. C. Such men! When it

came hard to smuggle liquor they built a big distillery inside the fort. They got corn from the Mandans and the Minnetarees and turned out all they needed. There was Pinaud who killed Blair at Cabanne's Post. Both were hunters for the post. Behold, it was cold-blooded murder. Pinaud is taken to St. Louis and put on trial for his life. Every one on the river knew he would be hung. Every one said: 'Eh? A rascal. May the devil take him!' And he was acquitted! No witnesses came down the river to tell the truth against him. The A. F. C. was willing he should be hung, but to place a noose around his neck would show the company was violating the law by selling liquor at its posts. So Pinaud, the murderer, is free and back up on the river somewhere, believing he can kill any one and not be punished. I have often wished I could have him within good throwing distance."

A rifle barked behind them and Lander's mule bolted. The shot hardly sounded before Papa Clair was off his mule and crouching behind some wild rose bushes.

"Get down! Get down! Do you want to see the mountains, my friend?" he softly called out.

Lander fell off his mule and crawled behind

a walnut tree, his animal trotting away to find its mate in Clair's hiding-place. And this was the danger Clair should have anticipated when he started to travel across the bend.

Clair beckoned for Lander to crawl to him. As Lander obeyed he instructed:

"Take the mules and lead them back from the river. Name of a pig! Why did I forget there were others who were hungry to walk on the land!"

"If there is to be any fighting—" Lander began.

"*Non! non!* I must see how many of the murderers are behind us. It may be it is some straggler."

Securing the mules Lander bent half double and slowly worked them back from the bend. Papa pulled his ragged hat firmly over his white hair and began scouting his back trail. Moving with exquisite cunning he reached the spot where he believed the assassin must have stood in firing the shot. He circled about this point, moving with the ease of a shadow. He heard nothing to arouse his suspicions, but when half-way round the circle he came upon signs which told him one man had recently passed there. Now a faint

"*hulloo*" came down the wind, indicating the shot had been heard.

Taking the unknown's trail Clair followed it. He believed that some of those who had gone ahead would be returning soon to investigate the shot.

He trailed the would-be slayer across the circle and into his own trail. To his trained eye it was obvious the man ahead was no woodsman, for his signs were many and exhibited much awkwardness.

Coming to some bull-berry bushes which stood twelve feet high and were thick with thorns Papa noted a thread caught on a thorn. He examined it carefully and pronounced it to be homespun. The man had crowded too close to the ticklish cover. Why? Clair crept around the bushes and to his horror caught a glimpse of Lander making up the bush-grown slope. He vanished almost as soon as seen, but there were other open spots ahead of him.

With a click of the teeth that denoted dismay Papa Clair shifted his gaze to the foreground, desperately seeking the snake before he could strike. He swept his eyes in a semicircle and repeated before he made out the homespun-clad

figure blending in with the bare, dull branches of the bush growth. The man was kneeling and his long rifle was bearing on the slope. As Papa Clair raised his rifle Lander came into view. The assassin steadied his gun, but Clair's was the only shot fired. Lander turned and stared down into the lowlands.

Clair raced to the silent figure, gave it one glance, and then tore up the rise to Lander.

"Hat of the devil!" panted the old man, seizing the mules and fairly dragging the surprised young man into the bushes.

"Are they coming?" gasped Lander.

"If not it is not because *m'sieu* has not invited them," groaned Papa. "You ride in the sunlight, in open places, where all the world can see you. At night you should carry a flaming torch in each hand and sing. Then you would throw the assassins off the trail. *Messieurs*, the murderers, must be puzzled to know where you are."

"I must be very green," Lander sheepishly confessed. "I didn't think I could be seen. Who fired the shot?"

"I, Etienne Clair. Dillings was stalking you as he would a blind bull."

"Of course you—" faltered Lander.

"I always do. Had I had time I should have used the knife. Come—the others will be hurrying here like turkey-buzzards after meat."

They turned north almost at right angles with the river and had barely lost themselves in a region of scrub when a hoarse howl at the neck of the bend advertised the discovery of Dillings' body. The two mules left an open trail, and Papa Clair dismounted and scouted ahead. Soon he whistled and Lander joined him on a stretch of stony ground that ran east and west. Clair mounted and took time to breathe deeply.

"They are not woodsmen, my friend. They are but tavern loungers. Yet behold, a man without eyes could follow our trail. So it is very good we reached this rough strip. We will follow it west and strike into the bull-berry bushes."

"Thanks to you we got out of that mess nicely," shivered Lander.

"Not yet out of it. They know we are here. They heard Dillings shoot. They know he wouldn't fire unless he saw something to shoot at. They heard my shot. They find him dead. We have lost a move. Now we will hold back and be sure the boat has gone on ahead even if we arrive at Lexington after the outfit has started."

"And be hunted by Tilton's gang all the way to Lexington," reminded Lander. "They'll quit the boat and chase us afoot."

"Bah! they are nothing. If only——"

"Go on," urged Lander.

"If only they do not send the tall hunter after us," mused Clair. "He is used to following trails and reading signs. When he hears of Dillings' death he will know we took the deer. He will not get his satisfy till he bags us. But God wills."

They traveled hard as long as a shred of light remained, purposing to add as much distance as possible after darkness should blot out their trail from the hunter's knowing eyes. Then they would keep to cover until satisfied the *Golden Queen* was far up the river. They knew the boat would not wait for any scheme of vengeance to be worked out. Lander surmised his old friend was apprehensive. He was sure of it when the old man insisted they build no fire but eat what meat they already had cooked.

"Tall and thin. Thin as a buffalo cow in early spring," he mumbled as he tore at his food. Then to Lander: "You saw the hunter. How did he walk?"

"I didn't notice, beyond his trick of swinging

his right leg sideways a bit. Maybe he didn't, but that's the way it looked."

"Good! You will make a mountain man yet—if you live. It all came to me a few minutes ago. I saw it and did not think about it till now. Now something inside of my head gave me a jerk and said for me to remember how he swung his leg. There could be no other."

"Meaning the hunter?" puzzled Lander.

"Pinaud, the hunter. The man who murdered Blair, and who would have been hung if the A. F. C. had not been trading whisky to the Indians. He's as deadly as a rattlesnake, a killer by nature. He is very worthy of one's best attention. It is to be regretted we must take the mules along."

Lander found his appetite diminishing. Pinaud, the hunter, was a vastly different proposition from Tilton and his blundering roughs. Lander suggested they stand watch but Papa shook his head, reminding that even a Pinaud could not follow a trail through the darkness.

"Then he must have sleep. In the morning he will seek us. The boat can not wait for him to hunt us and the boat must have fresh meat. He will try to add us to his bag as he goes along."

They were not disturbed that night, and they entered upon the sixth day of their journey with considerable confidence. The mules were a nuisance, but it was out of the question to consider leaving them behind when Bridger depended upon them for the overland trip. They avoided the sky-line when in the open and toward midday saw smoke above the trees. Something had delayed the boat, and instead of being behind they were ahead of it.

"We will wait for it to pass," mumbled Papa. "I will find some dry stuff which will not smoke and we will risk a fire. You shall broil some meat while I look about."

Lander stuck some green willow wands into the ground so that the meat-laden tips inclined over the small, smokeless blaze, and then settled himself to wait for Papa Clair's return. He sensed no danger as he sat there, hands resting on his knees. Pinaud, the hunter, was the last person in his thoughts for the excellent reason that Miss Susette was there, a vision that excluded all else. Then Pinaud, the hunter, suddenly stood before him, a savage grin on his thin, dark face as he pointed his rifle and kicked Lander's gun to one side.

Lander had no time to betray the surprise he felt. He curiously wondered why the man did not shoot.

"Where is your mate?" softly asked Pinaud, rolling his eyes to search the surrounding cover.

Then Lander surmised his life would be spared so long, as the shot would serve to bring Papa Clair to the scene. This hope was shattered as Pinaud's prowling eyes took in the rifle he had kicked aside. Provided with an extra gun, the very thing he had refrained from doing—discharging his rifle—became the strategic thing to do. He could kill Lander, then wait behind a bush for Clair to come up and catch the bullet from the second weapon. As Clair might return at any moment he must either shoot or retreat at once.

"Where is your mate?" he repeated.

"Looking for you."

"You mean he knows who I am?"

"Pinaud, the hunter. We saw you on the boat several days ago. We've seen you every day since."

Pinaud frowned and darted his sharp gaze from side to side.

"You found a deer. One I shot for the boat. You took it," he ominously accused.

Lander nodded toward the broiling venison.

"Who is the other man?" hissed Pinaud.

"Papa Clair, of New Orleans and St. Louis."

Had a rattlesnake sounded his warning between the hunter's moccasins the effect could not have been more pronounced. He leaped to one side and snatched his gaze from Lander long enough to reconnoiter in every direction, while he tilted his head and with his supernormal hearing sought to catch some sound of Clair returning.

"Curse him," he softly whispered. "Wanted me hung in St. Louis for killing a dog. But they didn't dare hang Pinaud, the hunter."

Lander held his lazy position, his hands clasping his knees, his right hand over the haft of the knife inside the bootleg, his attention concentrated on the man who had come to kill him.

"How far was he going?" snarled Pinaud, again betraying uneasiness.

"To the boat."

"You lie! I'm going to shoot you."

"Go ahead. Clair will get you before you can reload."

"I'll have your gun for him."

"You'll need to load it first."

Pinaud stirred the long piece with his foot but did not dare to risk any examination. Suddenly he began smiling.

"It's a good joke on me," he explained. "I've hunted and shot game so long I forgot I do not have to use my rifle on you." And he grinned ferociously as he observed Lander's empty belt. "Death without any noise. Then I camp by your body and shoot old Clair, the meddler, when he comes back. Yes, that is very good. Strange game I'll hang up for the boat to take off. And a good price I'll get from Hurry-Up Parker."

He approached, walking on his toes and crouching ready for a spring. Lander, as if hypnotized by fear, did not stir. When within ten feet of Lander the hunter snatched out his long butcher-knife, dropped his rifle and sprang on his victim. He was in mid-air when Lander's right hand flashed out Papa Clair's gift knife.

Pinaud's moccasins struck the ground only for him to leap back to recover his discarded rifle. Lander jumped after him and gave him no time to snatch up the weapon. To add to the drama of the scene a low whistle sounded near by. Lander answered it. Now Pinaud knew the trap

he had set had caught himself unless he could make his escape with the next sixty seconds. He commenced desperate knife play, but his heart wilted as he found his blade turned aside with a precision and firmness he had never encountered before.

The whistle was repeated. With a yelp of dismay Pinaud kicked at Lander's knee and thrust. There was a slither of steel against steel as the two blades crossed and locked, a cunning twist, and Pinaud fell to the ground, stabbed through the heart.

It was thus that Papa Clair found them. Pinaud's face was composed and serene. Lander's visage was wild and staring, and he caught his breath hysterically as he glared at the dead man. He was partly aroused by Papa Clair's cheery words:

"You've made it much simpler, my friend. We can now ride to Lexington without any fears of being overtaken by surprise. But there is one job we must first bother to 'do.'" And he moved toward the dead man.

"I can't touch it!" shuddered Lander.

"My mule and I haven't any such nice feelings," chuckled the old man. "Don't feel put out

because you wouldn't let a low-down murderer add you to his list of victims. His death is much to your credit."

Despite his frail physique he lifted the dead man and threw him across the mule and turned away.

"Wait," hoarsely cried Lander. "If you want to hide it, why not leave it here—under rocks? We must shift our camp anyway."

"Hide it!" exclaimed Papa Clair. "What foolishness. I'm going to hitch it to a tree so the look-out on the boat can see it and call out, 'Dead man on the starboard bow.'"

CHAPTER VI

FIVE WALKS

JIM BRIDGER walked over to a small tent back of the cook-tent, pushed aside the flaps and said:

"You can come out now. Boat's gone."

The tent was seemingly filled with supplies. A barrel, empty, moved aside and from a little pen within the barricade emerged Lander and Papa Clair.

"Where's Tilton?" asked Papa.

"He and his men have started down the river in two twenty-foot dugouts. Had all I could do to keep the boys from mounting 'em. At that Long Simons heaved Tilton into the river. We shall start as soon as the keelboat is under way."

Greeted by friendly grins and much coarse humor Lander and his old friend walked to the river bank, where some thirty men were ready to start the keelboat on its long trip. Etienne Pre-

Another volley, supplemented with much shouting, rang out from the bank, and Prevost roared his second order:

"Levez les perches!"

Up came the poles, only to drop overboard as the first order was repeated; and again the two lines of men buckled down to it with their shoulders against the knobs and their feet pushing the cleats forward. To Lander the uninitiated it was a stirring sight, not so much because of its novelty as for the romance and adventure it suggested. The men must carry the long tow-line along shores almost impassable. Whether on the move or tied up for the night there would be much danger from the Indians, especially from the Aricaras. It was destined that some of the light-hearted company would never return.

"Enough powder's been wasted, boys," called out Bridger. "Give 'em cheers and make ready to start. Come and help me get out the equipments."

Lander was soon busy handing out one pair of three-point blankets and powder and ball to each man. Finishing this task he joined Papa Clair and Bridger in assigning the mules. Each man had two, one to ride and one to lead as a pack

animal. Then followed the apportionment of goods for each mule, consisting of beaver traps, guns, powder, lead, blankets, liquor in curious flat casks, and clothing. The supplies of bacon and hardtack, and several hundred pounds of corn meal, went with the commissary department, which also had charge of a score of sheep. The last were to furnish meat until the company struck the buffalo country. In addition to Bridger and Papa Clair there were forty-five men in the company.

The scene became very animated when the mules rebelled, some breaking loose and running away, others rolling and scattering their loads. Each man was responsible for his two animals and it was some time before rebels were run down and brought back.

The word to march finally was given. The course was originally a buffalo trail, then an Indian trail and now the mountain man's recognized road. A few years later it would be known as the Oregon Trail and by the plains tribes as "The Great Medicine Road." For two days it followed the Santa Fé Trail, then swung aside to the northwest and after crossing Wakarusa Creek held on for thirty miles to the Kansas.

After a few days of travel the mules became accustomed, if not reconciled, to their burdens and Bridger proceeded to instill a little military discipline. He divided the company into four divisions of nine guards each and named nine officers. Every third day, as soon as camp was made and the mules had been picketed in the middle of the encampment, an officer posted the guards. Each twenty minutes thereafter the officer would call out, "All's well," and each guard in turn was expected to answer. When a man was found asleep at his post he was ordered to give up his gun in Bridger's tent, submit to a fine, usually five dollars, and be sentenced to "three walks," that is to travel afoot for three days. Because of the growing danger from prowling Indians the guards were not permitted to move from their posts, and this rule would have made the struggle against sleep a hard one had they been required to remain on duty longer than the scheduled two and a half hours.

Lander found himself in Porker's division and he fancied the man's eyes had a cruel glint as they rested on him. He disliked the man intensely and wished most heartily he had been assigned to Long Simons' squad. However, he turned to

his strange duties with a will, remembering it was Bridger and not Porker who was his boss. And there was much satisfaction in witnessing the esteem in which Bridger held Papa Clair. Papa was not required to act as captain of the guard, as the nine leaders easily looked after the four divisions.

From the start there was much about the adventure which Lander enjoyed immensely. The wildness and freedom of it all was a magnificent revelation to one who for two years had been cooped up in a store. A few minor details were irritating. He had no coffee nor sugar. The interminable bacon was occasionally varied with a piece of mutton, but mutton soon palled on his appetite. His companions encouraged him to hope for better things by repeatedly dwelling on the sumptuous feasts that would follow their first meeting with the buffalo.

All went well with Lander until after they had crossed the Big Blue, fording it near the mouth of the Little Blue. He had ceased to be suspicious of Porker's intentions.

Then came the night when his division stood the first watch.

Porker stationed his men as usual. Lander's

pack mule had been possessed of the devil that day, bolting twice over the back trail and losing his load by rolling. No sooner had Lander repacked and secured the load, with his mates a long line of dots on the edge of the plain, than his riding mule viciously leaped sidewise and threw his rider in a patch of prickly pears. Exhausted by his extra exertions and thoroughly disgusted with the prickly pear Lander made camp in a disgruntled frame of mind and dog-tired when assigned to his post.

Those not on duty were smoking and singing and telling stories or grinning secretly as they listened to Bridger's enthusiastic description of the wonders of the Yellowstone country. Bridger picked Papa Clair for his audience as he had not told him the stories before. Papa was polite from his moccasins to his snowy thatch and endeavored to smother any signs of incredulity. Yet the best he could do he could not refrain at times from emitting a low :

"Name of heaven! Holy blue! Caves of war-paint! Cascades of boiling water! 'A basin filled with scalding water springs which spout high to the heavens! Forests turned to stone! Believe? *Mon Dieu!* Of course. *M'sieu* says it. It is

enough. It is so. But it can not be any country on the surface of the globe. *M'sieu* must have gone through a hole and found hell!"

The shouts of laughter greeting such outbursts increased Lander's hunger for companionship. Then he discovered he was so sleepy that only by some miracle could he hope to keep awake. He would be helpless unless he walked about. He fought the minutes standing erect and found himself swaying on his feet. He dared not sit down.

As it grew darker and the camp quieted and there was no one to keep tabs on him he took to trotting round his post in a small circle and found the action did much to keep him up. Every twenty minutes Porker's voice bawled the call, and as often the men repeated it, the answer rippling in a circle about the camp.

Six times the call came and was answered, and Lander ceased his nervous pacing back and forth and became confident he could fight the remaining thirty minutes. There was no life about the camp except as the ghostly forms of gray wolves drifted near to investigate. Never had half an hour dragged out to such a miserable length. But at last came the call, and another ten minutes would see the guards free to seek their blankets.

The ten minutes passed and the relief came on with no one coming to relieve Lander. He could not understand how a mistake could have been made. He did not dare to leave his post to learn the reason; nor did he fancy yelling for the captain to come to him, thereby perhaps arousing the whole camp. Had he been sure the captain was Long Simons he would have risked finding him and explaining.

For the life of him it did not ~~seem~~ that he could endure another twenty minutes, and yet he was determined to hold on for that period. After the new captain called his "all's well," Lander would notice how many men answered. If nine replied besides himself it would show his relief had been posted apart from him. Instead of revealing the captain's error he would steal back to his blankets, soothed with knowing he had acted generously.

By a superhuman effort he kept his eyes open, and at last a voice called out the signal. It was not Long Simons' voice. One, two, three—nine men in all, including Lander, answered. The detail had lacked a man, and he had been held over without being warned of the necessity.

Now ire drove sleep from his mind. It seemed



to be the most serious affront that could be put upon him. He tried to recall the captain's voice and identify it. He decided not to answer the next twenty-minute call. The captain would come out to see if he were asleep and he would demand an explanation and ask to be released.

Because of his increasing anger the time passed quickly.

"All's well!" called the captain, his voice sounding much nearer than it did on the first call.

The reply was made by three men, skipped Lander and after a few moments' hesitation was taken up by the fifth guard. As he had expected Lander soon heard the soft steps of some one approaching and made out a vague figure in the starlight.

"Halt!" he snapped.

"That ye, Lander?"

"I should say so. Who are you? Sounds like Rummy."

"Rummy's right," answered the captain, swaggering forward. "Why didn't ye answer my call?"

"Because I've stood one watch and am tired. I wasn't relieved. Get a man here so I can turn in."

"Like thunder! Ye'll have to stick. I'm a man shy. One of my men was kicked by a mule. An' I want to know th' real reason why ye didn't answer when ye heard me hoot. Orders says ye must."

"I've told you. Keep the post yourself. I'm going to turn in." And shouldering his rifle Lander stalked toward the camp.

"Say, ye danged greenhorn, come back here on th' jump. Sleepin' on yer post——"

"You're a liar!"

"An' darin' to tell me to stand yer watch! I'll——"

"You go plumb to the devil!" snarled Lander, resuming his way.

He believed he had been in his blankets only a minute when he was aroused by a moccasin stirring his ribs. He blinked and sat up, then leaped to his feet inarticulate from wrath. Porker stood there, glaring at him evilly.

"So ye dis'beyed orders an' quit yer post in th' Injun country, ye runt," accused Porker. "I'll make a zample of ye."

"You put up that job with Rummy. Played me for two watches, you overgrown jackass."

With a deep-throated growl Porker drew back a foot and Lander leaped aside to escape a kick.

"I'll l'arn ye to dis'bey orders, an' give me any back talk," roared Porker, rushing him.

Lander dropped his hand to his boot and pulled his knife, informing:

"I've fought your style once. Now you'll fight mine."

Nothing loath, Porker whipped out his butcher-knife and made a murderous jab. To his amazement he felt Lander's knife against his, and the steel seemed to have fingers, for the butcher-knife was sent high in the air.

"Pick it up and come back here," snarled Lander.

"By the Lord Harry! Fighting with weapons in my camp!" thundered Bridger, running between the two.

Both began explaining at once, Porker black with fury at having been disarmed. Bridger silenced them and told Porker to tell his story. Porker did so, making out a very serious case against Lander.

Bridger turned to Lander after Porker had finished and nodded for him to present his

defense. Lander quickly narrated his experience. Bridger wheeled on the bully and demanded:

"You put him in to take the place of one of Rummy's men?"

"Had to, boss. One man shy, kicked by a mule."

"Why didn't you explain to him?"

"Didn't 'low there was any call to. Orders is orders an' he quit his post, leavin' it naked."

"I left Rummy there," broke in Lander.

"Porker, you'll act as guard after this. Papa Clair will take your place as captain. Lander, you quit your post without being relieved. It was your place to stick there till morning if necessary. You should have depended on me to see justice was done. You're fined ten dollars and three walks. I'll not take your gun as you may need it against Injuns."

Three days of walking decided Lander it would be better to fit into Bridger's machine than to try to be an independent cog. He also began to appreciate the virtue of placing the general good above any personal preference. He vowed he would never be sentenced to walk again. Yet very soon he was to find himself in trouble, and this time because his intentions were altruistic.

The company had been traveling along south of the Platte and now swung in close to the river. Four days after striking the river two of Bridger's hunters, who had wintered in the mountains and were now on their way to meet the outfit, brought in a load of buffalo meat. The entire company was hungry for fresh meat that was not mutton. The sheep, too, had dwindled in numbers until only Bridger and some of his right-hand men partook of it.

With the imagination of the greenhorn Lander had reveled in his anticipations of buffalo. The old timers had regaled him with descriptions of its lusciousness until his mouth watered. It did not seem as if he could wait until the meat was cooked. When it was found the buffalo chips were too green to burn and that there was no other fuel, he was foremost in foraging far and wide in search of dry sunflower stalks. By means of these the meat finally boiled and the company ravenously gathered for the feast.

As there were no dishes the cook selected a clean spot on the ground and emptied the kettle. Then the men lunged with their long butcher-knives, spearing meat with one hand and holding their little bags of salt in the other. With great

zest Lander secured a promising portion but on endeavoring to bolt a morsel found it to be as tough and resilient as rubber. His teeth were strong and sharp-set by hunger but it was impossible for him to chew it, let alone to swallow it.

"Bull!" grunted Long Simons observing the collapse of Lander's hopes. "Tough old bull, too."

It was one of the great disappointments of Lander's life. He had set his heart on that first meal of buffalo steaks. Papa Clair sought to cheer him up by assuring:

"Very soon some fat cows. Ah, name of heaven! But that will be fine eating!"

"Don't tell me any more," growled Lander. "One must be a wolf to eat anything grown in this country."

They pushed on up the river to the South Platte where the company was put on the alert by a scout discovering three dead buffaloes near the confluence of the two forks.

"Injun work! We must 'a' scared 'em away before they could dress the critters," said Bridger.

Throwing out scouts on each side and far in advance they proceeded to investigate the huge

carcasses. Bridger examined them carefully and was unable to find a wound.

"Boys, these fellers was killed by a bolt of lightning," he informed. "See how they fell with their noses close together. Their jackets will do for a bull-boat. Simons, Porker and Rummy, git their hides off. Papa Clair, take some men and git some willow boughs."

In what Lander considered to be a miraculously brief period of time the framework of willow was constructed and the green hides stretched over it. The result was a huge, awkward, buoyant craft, floating the water as gently as a bubble and drawing less than ten inches of water when loaded with three tons of supplies. By aid of this the company crossed the south fork to continue up the south side of the north fork. It was an ideal boat for shallow streams like the Platte, the Cheyenne and the Niobrara, but helpless in deep water where poles could not be used, and dangerous in swift waters where snags were thick, as the covering was easily punctured.

As in other things the white man had improved on the bull-boat of the Missouri tribes, which was nearly circular in shape and propelled by paddles, every stroke causing them to revolve

nearly around. This boat, so quickly put together, was twice as long as it was wide and easily controlled by polemen.

After the crossing, and when Chimney Rock came into view, Lander's zeal to be helpful got him into his second bit of trouble. In the clear atmosphere the Rock appeared to be very near, although distant two or three days' journey. Turning his pack mule over to Papa Clair, Lander rode off one side and up a low bluff to see what lay beyond. From Papa Clair he had learned that Bridger believed a large band of Indians was following the outfit. He wished to act the scout and be the first to discover the red men. Instead of Indians he beheld a large body of buffalo. The cows at this season were thin and sorry-looking creatures and poor eating, but near the edge of the herd he made out several that looked very fat. Could he take fat cow meat into camp he would indeed be a hero.

With a kick of the heel he sent the mule sliding down the north side of the bluff and made for the buffaloes. The old bull sentinels lifted their shaggy heads and bellowed a rumbling warning. The herd slowly got in motion and, by the time Lander was clear of the bluff, was in a well-or-



ganized retreat, the bulls bringing up the rear and guarding the sides most chivalrously, the cows and calves running in the middle. It was near sundown and the lateral beams of light made gorgeous play on the clouds of dust kicked up by the heavy creatures. Lander kept up the chase for a mile or more, then gave it up as useless and cursing his luck rode back to the company.

When he entered camp he was struck by the silence of the men and their averted faces. When one did look at him, especially if it were Rummy or Porker, he read keen hate in the furtive glance. Bridger sat alone before his small tent, his hands hanging limply over his knees, his brown hair brushed back, and his gray eyes frowning savagely.

"Lander, come here," he sternly called out.

Much puzzled Lander advanced and stood at attention.

"Why did you raise the buffaloes?" curtly demanded Bridger, his eyes now blazing with suppressed wrath.

"Raise the buffaloes," Lander faltered. "Why, I saw some fat cows. I wanted to kill some and bring the boys some real meat. The sheep was bad enough when we had it."

"Never mind that," interrupted Bridger. "You've been guilty of raising the buffaloes. If you was a' Injun, hunting with your tribe, an' you done that your lodge would be cut to pieces by the 'soldiers' an' your dogs killed. If it was the second time you done it you'd be beaten with clubs, perhaps killed. If you was a chief it wouldn't make any difference; for when a white or red raises the buffalo it means his people must go hungry."

"But I didn't know," cried Lander.

"A poor stomach-filler to give hungry men. Another time don't try things you don't know. Put your gun in my camp. Ten dollars fine and five walks."

As Lander slunk back among the men he found no welcome. Muttered curses were hurled at him from all sides. Only the fear of Bridger saved him from violence. Even Long Simons refused to show any good nature and grunted:

"Bridger oughter make ye keep five miles behind us. Then th' Injuns would git ye."

Lander waited for Papa Clair to give him sympathy, but the old man kept away from him. In this fashion did he learn what an unpardonable offense he had committed. Had the company

been out of food his thoughtlessness might have sentenced them all to starvation.

This resentment against the man who had raised the buffalo lost none of its edge even after Lander had walked away three days of his sentence. The spectacle of him limping into camp long after the evening meal had been served won him no sympathy. Papa Clair did see to it that his coarse rations were waiting for him.

Fortunately it was not his squad's turn to take a watch until near morning. With nothing but disagreeable thoughts to occupy his mind and denied the companionship of his fellows, Lander sullenly aided in building the raft of cottonwoods on which they crossed the forks of the Laramie. They found several more hunters arrived from the mountains to announce the summer rendezvous would be held on Green River near Horse Creek. The coming of the hunters and their statement that trade would be excellent if the A. F. C. outfit did not reach the rendezvous first put Bridger in good humor. Liquor was served and a big drunk indulged in. Bridger was also elated to learn that Jim Baker, who next to Carson was destined to be most highly valued by Frémont as a scout, was due to arrive soon.

"Dern him for a bunch of foolish fancies an' beliefs in Injun magic," chuckled Bridger reminiscently. "The Snake people have filled him full of funny notions. But as a mountain man there ain't nothing in the Missouri Valley that can teach him tricks."

"I remember when he went to the mountains a boy. Went for the A. F. C. I know of no man that has stuck to the mountains so close as *M'sieu* Baker," added Papa Clair. "I once saw him lose nine thousand dollars at a monte-bank at a rendezvous. He was on his way to the States to buy a farm. In the morning he started back for the mountains."

Bridger announced the course would be to the Sweetwater, striking the river near Independence Rock. As this route would be a little off the Platte Lander feared lest Baker might miss the outfit and keep on traveling east. He was bold enough to say as much. Bridger eyed him in silence for a minute. Those standing by doubled up and thrust their fists into their mouths. Even Papa Clair smiled.

Bridger said:

"For just pure, cussed, fool notions there ain't nothing west of the Mississippi that can show

you anything, young man. Git lost! Old Jim Baker git lost on nothing bigger'n a continent? Run by this outfit without seeing the trail? Wal, wal, live an' learn. Only some folks must live a thousand years, I reckon. How many walks left?"

"One."

"Spend it trying to turn your thoughts on yourself. Then think of the Rocky Mountains an' try to grasp some of the things you don't seem to cotton to just now."

That last walk was undertaken in much sullenness of spirit. Instead of following the trail made by the many mules Lander deliberately swung off to one side. Owing to the increased danger from Indians Bridger had given back his rifle, and suddenly the ambition seized him to show these uncouth men that he was amply able to care for himself. He would get game and camp by himself. He would not bother to make the outfit's camp that night, but would take his time and might keep away for several days. Then he would coolly drop in on them and refuse food, explaining that he had been stuffing himself.

His plan resulted as any plainsman could have warned him. Once he quit the trail he was lost.

He knew which way was west by the sun, but the western horizon was a mighty big stretch to aim at. He also knew the river was somewhere on his right, and that later it would bar his path where it flowed from the south and before swinging east to make the Missouri. But whether he was abreast of the company or had gone ahead of it he had no idea. He knew he had made excellent time as he had munched his hardtack rations and bacon as he walked. That night he camped alone from necessity.

There followed several days of lonely wanderings. His food, consisting of hardtack, was soon consumed. He managed to shoot a prairie hen but had traveled so wide of the river that he depended on buffalo wallows for water. He was hungry, but he suffered more from loneliness than from lack of food.

At last he came to a stream which he followed until it merged with another. He was at the junction of the Sweetwater and the north fork of the Platte, only he did not know it. In the southeast were the Laramie Mountains and in the north the Rattlesnake Hills. These were unnamed so far as his knowledge of them went. It was in the middle of the afternoon when he threw himself

down by the stream to drink and bathe his head in the icy water. As he rested there a buffalo cow, fairly fat, clambered down from a circular mound and made for the river. By luck Lander managed to make a kill.

As a butcher he had much to learn but with the knife he was an artist. In a short time he had lifted the back fat and had the tongue cooking over a fire. He commenced to eat when the meat was but partly cooked.

"You're a devil of a feller!" remarked a voice behind him.

Flopping wildly about he beheld a white man, tanned to the color of an Indian, his hair long and unkempt, his face smothered in whiskers.

"Who might ye be, a comin' out hyar an' skeerin' all th' Injuns up into Canada by yer bold ways?"

"Have some grub. I belong with Jim Bridger's outfit. Strayed away like a fool greenhorn. Who are you?"

"Jim Baker, fresh from Green River. Reckon I'll cut off a leetle more meat an' set it to cookin'."

So this was the man who was indirectly responsible for his keeping aloof from his mates until he

became lost, Lander mused. This shaggy creature was the man whose coming was so eagerly looked forward to by Bridger. Lander was disappointed. He watched Baker skilfully slice off several portions and proceed to roast them. He observed how he tossed a bit over his shoulder but did not know this was an offering to ghosts.

Baker at last satisfied his enormous appetite and produced a pipe from the bead-embroidered holder worn around his neck. Filling this and lighting it he puffed to the sky and earth and four wind gods, then abruptly inquired:

"How 'bout Injuns?"

"None round here. Ain't seen a one during my tramp. Been going it alone for four days."

"Lawd a massy! But ye be some traveler!" admired Baker. "An' ain't see' no Injuns?"

"Nothing but wolves. There's two now looking down at us from the top of the bluff behind us."

"What's th' color o' their legs?" lazily asked Baker without turning his head.

"Only their heads and shoulders show. Now they're sneaking away."

Baker became silent, seeming to forget he was not alone. Next he muttered to himself and

repeated something Lander thought was gibberish, but which was a Snake charm against evil medicine; for Baker was as superstitious as the Indians among whom he had lived.

"How'd ye git lost?" he abruptly asked.

Lander explained, adding:

"Bridger laughed at my thinking you might pass the outfit without knowing it. But here you are. The laugh will be on him."

"Most likely," gravely agreed Baker. "Ye're a queer young cuss. Can't ye see ye got ahead o' th' outfit? Meetin' me proves that. Ye walked fast, prob'ly a bit skeered. Bridger halted an' sent men back to find ye. He must be cussin' in a way that'd do a man's heart good by this time. While his men was goin' back ye swung out one side an' passed th' outfit. I suttinly want to be round when Jim lets out on ye."

Saying this Baker fished out his medicine bag and cautiously opened it, screening the act with his body. Tired of being ignored and criticized, Lander took his rifle and strolled toward the bluffs.

Baker was absorbed with his medicine and took no notice of Lander's departure until he was well under the bluff. Replacing the bag he glanced

about and beheld Lander behind a boulder, his rifle aiming at two wolves. The wolves' heads were all that was visible.

"Don't shoot!" yelled Baker. "Come back here!"

He spoke too late. The rifle cracked and one of the wolves came crashing down the side of the bluff. It rolled to Lander's feet and caused him to think he had lost his senses by exposing the legs of a man.

"Good heavens!" he gasped, staggering back.

With an oath Baker ran to him, yelping:

"Wanter cook us, ye derved fool?"

"What is it?" faltered Lander, glaring at the wolf's head and body and the pair of legs.

"Injuns spyin' on us. Now that ye've salted one o' them th' hull tribe'll be here after our ha'r."

With that he ripped aside the wolfskin and revealed a warrior in full paint. One glance and he muttered:

"Sin an' mis'ry! Jest as I feared. Black-foot! Lawdy massy, but won't they walk it to us! Wal, he's dead. Wish they all was. Git yer sculp an' we'll be pickin' out a good place to die in."

"Scalp? I—I don't want it," shuddered Lander. "I thought it was a wolf."

"Yer medicine must be mighty weak. Never right to waste ha'r. This is a prime one, too. It counts something to show a Blackfoot sculp. I'll make a feast for my medicine an' give it th' sculp."

Lander turned his head as the mountain man whipped out his knife and quickly raised the warrior's scalp lock and thrust it into his hunting shirt. Then he sounded the Snake cry of defiance.

"You'll call them down on us," remonstrated Lander.

"If they don't kill us ye'll make me die laffin'," informed Baker. "Foller me right pert. I've got a mule hid back a piece, but mules can't save us. It's for us to hole up where we can git water. Load yer rifle an' be ready to drag in th' buf'ler meat when I find a good place."

Baker scurried into the rocks near the river and found an overhanging cliff with a small alcove at its base. There they dragged the cow and collected dry buffalo chips for fuel. If closely besieged it would be impossible, Lander believed, to cover the short distance to the river

without challenging death, but Baker smiled grimly and said he would guarantee a full supply of water.

"What we want to do first is to make a fire an' cook up all the meat we can. Some of it we'll jerk. Meat cured in th' sun will keep a good spell."

As he finished speaking he grabbed Lander, who was bending over the cow, and violently hurled him backward. As he did so a dozen war arrows stuck into the carcass.

"Th' derned cusses have come!" grunted Baker, dropping behind a boulder and nursing his rifle.

CHAPTER VII

BLACKFOOT AND CROW

“THEY’RE shootin’ from up thar,” said Baker pointing to the top of the opposite cliff. “Them are Siksika arrers, worst tribe o’ th’ Blackfeet. They’re worse ’n th’ Bloods, an’ th’ Bloods is worse’n th’ Piegans, an’ th’ three tribes o’ th’ Blackfeet is worse’n Sioux or Aricaras in fightin’ th’ whites.”

Then with awe in his voice he informed:

“Each tribe has medicine bundles what’s most amazin’ strong. They worship Napi, th’ Old Man, an’ he suttingly has took mighty good care of ’em so far. They’re allers ag’in’ us Americans, but they’ll take their trade to H. B. posts fast ’nough. There ain’t a fur company west o’ th’ Mississipp’ that ain’t tried to make peace with ’em an’ git a chance at their furs. Bridger ’n’ me have tried to ketch one o’ th’ devils alive to hold him an’ tame him so’s we could have some one to take

a talk back to th' tribe. Lawdy massy, but there's rich pickin' for th' trader what gits in. Reckon McKenzie o' Fort Union will be th' first. He's got a white hunter what speaks their lingo. We've tried to git at 'em through some o' their neighbors, but they are allers fightin' th' Sioux, Cree, Assiniboins, Flatheads an' th' Snakes. I'd give a season's profits if I had one o' their medicine bundles." Then hastily, as if apologizing, "Not that my medicine ain't strong 'nough, but sometimes ye can git a new medicine that'll work for ye when yer old medicine gits tired."

"They seem to be very quiet. Perhaps they are gone," suggested Lander.

"Ye make me feel like I did afore I ever come to th' mountains," said Baker with a grim smile. "Folks back East allers use to be tellin' 'bout th' noble Injun! Gone away when they've got a fine chance to cut white throats? Sho! I'm plumb 'shamed of ye. I've lived among Injuns an' like some tribes. I know some I'd trust quicker'n I would most whites. Their medicines is powerful strong. Anybody oughter know that. But after all's said they are the most onsartin varmints in th' world. They ain't only half human. Younker, did ye ever see a human that ye'd fed an' treated

to th' best fixin's in yer lodge who'd steal yer hosses when he come to go away? Wal, that's th' Injun's notion o' sayin', 'Much obleeged.' My idee is never to give 'em any gifts. Jest ask th' whole b'ilin' to a big feast an' raise half their ha'r. T'other half'll be mighty sharp set to keep peaceful for a while."

"I believe they've gone away," insisted Lander, who was in no mood to listen to Baker's eccentric observations.

"Some trick," mumbled Baker thoughtfully. "S'pose ye jest keep yer eyes to th' front while I look at my medicine."

With great contempt for Baker's superstitions Lander stared toward the river, seeing no sign of the enemy except the fringe of arrows sticking in the carcass of the buffalo. Baker faced toward the cliff behind him, produced his medicine bag, cautiously opened and closed it four times, and muttered:

"That oughter crack hell open 'bout a mile if it ain't lost its old kick. That last sculp, even if I didn't kill it, oughter give any honest medicine a heap o' guts. I'll b'ile some berries an' make it a real feast first chance I git."

Lander by this time had discovered he was very

thirsty. And as Baker was absorbed with his heathenish rites, the river but a few yards away and no enemy in sight it seemed a simple matter to advance and fill a hat with water. Baker restored the medicine bag to the bosom of his hunting shirt and turned in time to behold Lander start for the river with a Blackfoot warrior dropping from the heavens to alight within a few feet of him. The long rawhide rope, dangling from the edge of the cliff, was immediately utilized by a second warrior.

"Trouble woke up!" yelled Baker, snatching up his rifle and shooting the warrior from the rope.

Clubbing his weapon he sprang to assist Lander, who by this time had drawn his knife from his boot. The Indian, although realizing he was lost unless instantly reinforced, leaped at Lander and attempted to run him through with a long butcher-knife.

"Load your rifle! I'll take care of this one," called out Lander, parrying the thrust.

Baker reversed his gun and proceeded to reload it, his eyes staring admiringly at the young man's unexpected display of talent.

"Rip him, boy!" he shouted. "Lawdy massy! But that medicine o' mine is shore kickin' an' a

rarin'! Fetched 'em right outer th' sky." Then anxiously: "But some things can be overdone. No medicine oughter fetch in more trouble than a man can dish away."

He glanced apprehensively at the swinging rope, then back to the duelists circling about each other.

"Keep away, Baker! This is my game. Watch the rope! They crossed over from the other side. That's why they were still so long."

"Git after him," Baker anxiously urged. "He must have a good medicine, or he'd never come down here—Godfrey! Look out!"

The warrior suddenly shifted his tactics and with a series of lightning-like thrusts took the offensive. Baker cocked his rifle but dared not fire at the dodging figures. He called on Lander to look out, to leap to one side; and then came the miracle. The warrior's knife leaped from his hand and described a glittering arc that ended in the racing river, and he went down with a gush of blood from his throat. Lander, weak with excitement and his exertions, stood trembling and staring at his work.

Baker caught him by the arm and drew him in under the cliff, loudly bawling:

"I'll trade ye a dozen packs o' prime beaver for yer medicine!"

A howl of rage came from the top of the cliff, while futile arrows rattled about the opening of the alcove. But there was no further attempt to descend the rope.

"Of course it was my medicine what fetched 'em down," declared Baker, fearful lest his praise of Lander's medicine might incite jealousy. "When I open that bag four times an' p'int it towards a Injun he's pretty nigh bein' my meat. Wish I could git out there an' sculp 'em!"

"That can wait," snarled Lander, overwrought by his experience and his disgust at a practise commonplace among mountain men. "They must be coming in a bunch. Hear them yelling?"

"It's a small band or they'd been here afore this," growled Baker, wrinkling his brows. "Reckon they're in more trouble. My medicine has sot a trap for 'em. Reckon Bridger's come up. No, there ain't no sounds o' guns."

The clamor on top of the cliff now receded although still audible. Baker pricked his ears and from the ferocious chorus began to deduce the truth.

"Crows jumped 'em!" he suddenly roared,



"Keep away, Baker! This is my game."

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darting from under the cliff and pausing to tear off the two scalps. "Come on! They're ridin' down th' south side o' th' cliff to the plain."

Securing his gun Lander raced after him. They rounded the end of the cliff and came out into the broken country. The river side of the cliff was less than a hundred feet high, and already the Blackfeet had withdrawn from it and were retiring in a compact body and repulsing the attacks of a much larger body of Indians.

"I know'd they was Crows by their yells. See what large bows they use. Make 'em stout with elk or bighorn an' rattlesnake skins. There's mighty good medicine in a snake skin if ye know th' right songs an' can git on th' good side of it. But if ye fail it'll turn on ye like a rattler."

"What shall we do? Go help the Crows or take our mules and ride for it?"

"Stick along here. Crows won't hurt us. They'll take yer mule an' mine if they find it. If we should run away they'd take both guns. Most amazin' thieves."

The two watched the haughty Blackfeet skilfully continue their retreat. Two of their warriors fell before the murderous arrow fire, but were almost immediately scooped up and thrown

across their ponies. The Crows, superb horsemen, rushed them from all sides, riding low like Comanches with only the tip of a moccasin showing. But although outnumbering their hereditary enemies, the Crows accomplished nothing more than to slay or severely wound three men and to drive them all away from the river.

Baker returned to the river and built a fire. He began cooking buffalo meat and urged Lander to eat. "They'll gobble down everything when they git here," he warned.

Lander was not hungry. The spectacle of the two dead warriors sickened him.

A rumbling clatter of hoofs and much demoniac yelling and the white men were surrounded by the Crows. The first to arrive leaped to the ground and began feasting on the buffalo. The leader, a weathered wisp of a man, whose hair and skin looked dead but whose eyes were two fires, walked up to Lander and yanked the rifle from his hand. Lander reached to his boot.

"Keep away from that knifel" snarled Baker. "Jest smile."

The leader wheeled on Baker and reached out to appropriate his rifle. The mountain man laughed in his face and taunted:

"Black Arrow can not take scalps, so he must take his friend's rifle."

The Indian drew back, then recognized Baker and sullenly thrust out his hand in greeting and said:

"My young men need guns. But you are our friend. We will take only one gun. That shall pay for saving your lives."

At this Baker became all Indian. He slapped his breast haughtily and in the tongue of the Absaroke said:

"Chief of the Sparrowhawk people, look up the river bank. You will find two dead Blackfoot dogs there. Here are their scalps. Why does Black Arrow come riding in like a foolish Indian raising the buffalo and scaring his white friend's game away? Black Arrow has spoiled our hunting just as the killing was beginning. Why did he not keep away till we had killed more Blackfeet? Shall we give him a gun for that?"

The dead Blackfeet and their scalps now flaunted in the chief's face carried pardon for the trapper's insolence. The Absaroke, or Crows, could forgive much in a man who had killed two of their terrible foes. There was a rush to examine the slain warriors, and when it was found that

one was killed by a knife, although the two loaded rifles had not made that necessary, the chief reflected the respectful attitude of his followers when he asked:

"Why use the knife when you had guns?"

"Why waste lead on those dogs?" countered Baker. "We need our rifles for game, not for killing Blackfeet. My young brother is mighty knife-fighter." Then in English. "Where d'ye l'arn th' knife, younker?"

"Papa Clair."

"Loaded an' primed!" Then in Absaroke: "There is no warrior in your band who can touch him with a knife without losing blood. He is big medicine. Stand your best man before him. If he brings blood without losing blood you shall keep the rifle. If my young brother's medicine is the stronger you shall not take the rifle."

To Lander and scarcely able to conceal his anxiety he said: "I've told 'em they ain't got a man that can tech ye with a knife without bein' blooded. If Papa Clair l'arned ye th' knife ye oughter be prime. Have I spoke too strong?"

"I don't think so," Lander modestly replied. "Papa Clair said I knew all he knew."

"Glory be! Don't kill. Jest prove ye're best

man." To the chief: "Got any braves who believe in their medicine?"

Black Arrow scowled at the insolence of the challenge and yelled to his men. One of them, wearing much red cloth as a fringe for his leggings, leaped from his pony and pulling his knife ran toward Lander. With a most savage expression on his haughty face he held the knife upright before his eyes, then lowered it and contemptuously addressed Lander:

"He says he'll cut th' sacred totem o' th' Crows (the Swastika cross) on yer face, then cut yer throat. How's yer medicine?"

"I don't know," muttered Lander, inwardly flinching before the warrior's ferocious bearing. "But I know what Papa Clair has told me."

"Then ye know 'nough to give him his needin's with one hand tied to yer foot. He's waitin'. Git after him an' when they ain't looking' I'll open my medicine bag at him. If our two medicines can't fetch him nothin' short o' th' devil can."

Lander had no heart for the business. He resented Baker's forcing him into the trial. He had fought and killed one Indian to save his life. But this contest, merely to prove his superiority,

was not to his taste. However, the brave was growing impatient and sneering openly as he believed he read the other's hesitancy. With a flash of his hand Lander drew Papa Clair's gift knife and stood on guard.

The Indians exclaimed in admiration as they beheld the weapon. The haft was embellished with much silver of Spanish workmanship and there was a fretwork of the white metal on the upper half of the big blade.

Lander's opponent endeavored to rush in and bewilder his man with repeated onslaughts. His point streaked back and forth, all but ripping the skin above the eyes. For a minute Lander worked only on the defensive. Then anger grew up in his heart and calmed his nerves and he stopped giving ground and began advancing. Each forward step was taken with a precision that suddenly stilled the chorus of jeers. And as he advanced he formed his purpose and drove his man toward the river. His blade parried and menaced but refrained from touching the painted breast, although it was obvious to the spectators it could have been fleshed to the hilt several times.

The Indian suspected he was being played with

and sought to keep clear of the river, but each attempt to work one side resulted in a vicious slash of the glittering steel that fenced him in. The cries of his friends now told the warrior he was on the brink of the bank and he made a last desperate rally and flung himself forward recklessly. Instantly the stabbing knife was pushed to one side and lifting his hand Lander struck heavily with the haft, the blow falling full between the scowling eyes and knocking the man into the icy current. Lander had had his man at his mercy and had vanquished him without losing or drawing a drop of blood.

"He has big knife medicine," reluctantly admitted Black Arrow. Then to Lander he spoke rapidly. Baker interpreted:

"He says if ye will come to live with him in th' valley o' th' Big Horn he'll give ye a big lodge an' his darter for a wife. Th' Crows is allers fond o' havin' white men live with 'em. He says he'll let ye handle th' Crow trade in buf'ler robes an' bighorn leather. Th' robes is mighty fine an' it's a chance to trade for a mighty fine profit that most old mountain men would jump at. If I wa'n't tied up with th' Snakes I'd jump at it myself."

"Tell him I am with Jim Bridger, that I want him to bring the Crow trade to Bridger on Green River."

"Jim Bridger won't hold ye to yer bargain when he knows ye can better yerself. Crow women are mighty likely-lookin' women."

"Tell him what I say. Sometimes I'll visit him and teach his young men how to handle the knife."

Baker choked back a laugh and muttered:

"Lawdy massy! First trip out here an' ye're puttin' on more airs then Kit Carson or Jim Bridger hisself." Then gravely:

"But that's th' way to hoot when yer medicine is good an' strong. Makes yer medicine feel proud an' keen to work for ye, too. I'll tell him what ye say. Don't do any hurt to make a friend o' him an' git first whack at his trade. They've been carryin' th' most of it to Fort Union."

Black Arrow was disappointed at Lander's refusal to join his tribe, but readily promised to take a good trade to the Green River rendezvous, but vowed he would deliver it to none but Lander. The warrior who had been knocked into the river now came up to Lander with, as the latter believed, hostile intentions. There was a knob

the size of an egg between his eyes. Baker was in time with his warning:

"Th' critter don't mean no harm."

The Indian gestured for permission to examine the knife that had conquered him. It was a beautiful weapon, and the brave saved his pride by attributing his defeat to the medicine in it rather than to Lander's skill. He gazed at it longingly, then led up his pony and offered to trade. Lander might have been tempted as the animal was far superior to the average run of horse-flesh owned by mountain men, but Baker warned:

"Don't swap yer medicine. Ye're big guns with 'em now. I'll tell 'em th' medicine won't work for no one but yerself. Ye're lucky if yer medicine ain't mad at ye for even thinkin' o' doin' sech a thing."

So Lander refused, and Baker softened it down in interpreting it, then drew Black Arrow to one side and talked with him some minutes. Coming back to Lander he explained:

"Chief says them Blackfeet, 'bout a hundred 'n' fifty of 'em, are jest back from visitin' their friends, th' 'Rapahos, an' on their way to a big band now campin' in Jackson's Hole near th' Three Tetons. Says th' big band held up a H. B.

trader an' took a British flag an' forty packs o' beaver from him. If these Crows had put up a real fight they could 'a' wiped out this small band, as there must be more'n two hundred here. But it was Injun style—gallop lickety-split, shoot arrers while t'other side run away, then quit an' never git down to real business. Th' Blackfeet will fetch their friends back to chaw th' Crows up."

Several young bucks who had followed the river down now began riding back and forth and waving their robes. Black Arrow leaped on his pony and rode up a low bluff. The bucks had signaled "enemy."

Lander mounted his mule and followed the chief. Far in the east was dust. Black Arrow's sharp old eye studied it for a minute; then he turned to Lander and drew his hand across his forehead in the sign for a hat, or white men. Lander was obtuse and the chief touched his hand and then passed it up and down his arms and body. Lander understood this: "All white," and yelled down to Jim Baker:

"Bet it's Bridger's outfit. Chief says they're white men."

Baker repeated this to the Indians surrounding

him, and instantly the war-like preparations ceased. The bucks now came tearing up the river making the sign of the hat. As Black Arrow rejoined his men there was a flash of action caused by a brave bringing in the mule Baker had concealed before surprising Lander at the river. Baker appropriated the animal without bothering to explain, and the warrior pulled an ax.

Lander drove his mule between the two and pulled his knife. Black Arrow intervened in time to prevent a tragedy. Explanations followed and peace was restored just as the scouts came up to announce the supposed enemy was some thirty white men, riding as fast as their weary mounts could bring them.

Advising Black Arrow to remain where he was and keep all his men with him Baker motioned to Lander and rode down the river to meet their friends. At the head of the band were Bridger and Papa Clair. Lander, knowing the strength of the outfit, saw that a dozen or more men had been left behind, doubtless to bring up the pack animals.

"My young friend!" joyfully called out Papa Clair, swinging up his hand. "We heard shots! We feared! We rode!"

"Howdy, Jim," sang out Baker.

"Howdy, Jim. Did you find him, or did he find you?" asked Bridger, nodding coldly toward Lander.

"Found each other. Had a muss with Black-feet. He shot one afore th' scrimmage. Then I got one with my old gun, an' he got another with his knife. Big medicine in that knife o' his'n if any one asks ye. Then Black Arrer with his Crows come along an' drove th' skunks off. Now th' old cuss is back there waitin' to be told he's a big Injun."

"Lander, you've held up my outfit two days," sternly informed Bridger. "You're too much trouble to suit me. I'm sending an express back to St. Louis. Make ready to go with it."

"I stay in the mountains if I ever get into them, Mr. Bridger. If I can't work for you perhaps I can work for some other outfit. If no one will hire me I'll turn free trader."

"Free trader?" scoffed Bridger. "You a trader? Where's your outfit? If you had any goods who'd trade with you? You're crazy."

"*M'sieu* Bridger, but you are speaking to my young friend," gently remonstrated Papa Clair.

"You can't fix a fight on me, Papa, if you try

for a year. Lander's all right but he's out of place up here. When we stopped for two days and searched for him we were giving the A. F. C. that much advantage in trying to make the rendezvous ahead of us. It won't do."

"Ye got plenty o' time, Jim," drawled Baker. "Then ag'in ye ain't goin' to lose no trade o' th' younker. He licked one o' Black Arrer's smartest Injuns in a knife fight an' th' chief wants to take him for his son. Failin' in that he says he'll fetch his trade to Green River an' turn it to th' younker, which means to ye. Hard to beat them Crows for robes made gay with porcupine quills an' fancy sewin'. Reckon he'd clean up all th' Crow trade if he took a outfit an' went an' lived with 'em."

Papa Clair's white mustaches went up as he smiled in keen enjoyment. Bridger's face broke into a wide grin and he whimsically surrendered:

"Reckon the express can git along without you, Lander. Only after this either keep ahead, or behind, or with us. Now we'll have a talk with the chief. Come along, Baker. The rest of you better stay back here till I've smoked with the old cuss."

The men gathered around Lander and eagerly

listened to his experience. That he had killed two Blackfeet was enough to erase his name from the roll of greenhorns, and even Porker treated him civilly. Long Simons acted most peculiar however. He kept in the background, yet conspicuous because of his red belt, and alternated between deep chuckles and heavy frowns. Lander liked him, and leaving his mule went to him, remarking:

"You don't seem very glad to see me back."

"Been trailin' ye ever since ye failed to turn up on th' second night. Jest now I've got some trouble an' some fun of my own on my hands. Stick round an' ye'll see what I mean."

"Here come the two Jims," answered Papa Clair.

"Everything is all right, men," called out Bridger. "We'll camp beyond the Crows. No quarreling, remember. They'll treat us right if we treat them right. What now, Baker?"

The last as Baker gave a snort of anger and slid from his mule, threw aside his rifle and discarded his belt. Lander was amazed to behold Long Simons removing his red belt and weapons and throwing them on the ground, his broad face grinning sheepishly.

"Holy blue! Are they crazy?" gasped Papa Clair.

"What's the matter, Jim?" demanded Bridger, his gray eyes twinkling.

"Jest a sort of a childish game. This lank, long perrarie dog let on at th' last rendezvous that my fightin' with grizzlies, when I killed two with my knife, was all a bundle o' lies. I swore I'd make him eat his words if he ever dared come back to th' mountains. An' I'm goin' to do it."

"Talk is cheap," sneered Long Simons. "Ye've kicked half-starved Injuns round so long that ye forgit white men don't crawl when ye bleat. Come along. I'll show ye one grizzly ye can't lick. Afore I'm done with ye, ye'll be tellin' th' boys th' truth. What ye killed with a knife was only two sick wolves."

"No biting or gouging," commanded Bridger. "This is no time for fun. After this all hoss-play must be finished at St. Charles."

"He won't have nothin' more to settle after I git through with him," declared Long Simons as he stripped off his shirt. "His troubles is about to be ended. Come to these arms, ye leetle grizzly tamer."

With a roar of anger Baker jumped into him.

The battles Lander had witnessed at St. Charles were tame affairs compared with this. With hoots of joy the mountain men formed a wide ring. Some of the Indians galloped up and to them Bridger explained that two of his men were playing a game. The two combatants discarded all finesse and came together with the intention of sticking until only one was able to stand.

Lander held his breath at the terrific punishment each inflicted and received. It seemed impossible that the human frame could survive such assaults. Baker was an inch shorter than Simons and quite a few pounds lighter. But his technique was that of a panther, a tremendous driving power that allowed his antagonist no breathing spell; an implacable hurricane that would rage until there was nothing left to assail. Long Simons physically was far above the average caliber of man, and grunted with joy in finding a full fight was brought to him.

From the moment they clashed it was almost impossible to distinguish them. They became a revolving mass, two dynamos that whirled over on the ground like a fly-wheel. When they came erect it was only to fall again.

There was no waiting, no cautious testing of

the other's strength. Each was confident of his own might, and sought to terminate the contest as speedily as possible. There was no defensive against offensive. It was offensive against offensive, two separate plants confidently conceived and meeting in furious collision.

"Jeer-ru-sa-leem!" screamed Rummy as some invisible force seemed to hurl the two apart and then bring them smashing together. The Indians, now generally attracted, watched with glittering eyes and low grunts of amazement.

Inside of five minutes of incessant, whirlwind tactics both were practically stripped to the buff. Suddenly Long Simons' arm slipped under Baker's arm and up over the shoulder with the broad palm smothering the face and pressing backward.

"Give in, ye babby bear fighter!" gasped Simons.

Lander realized that with a bit more pressure Baker's neck would break should he refuse to release the pressure of his own left arm. Back rocked his head, his wind shut off by the hand plastered over mouth and nose. Then his two fists came together on Simons' throat, each traveling only a few inches. The big fellow relaxed his

terrible hold, tottered and fell with blood streaming from his mouth and nose.

He groaned and rolled over on his back, glared up into Baker's wild face and tried to get back on his feet.

"Was them babby b'ars?" faintly asked Baker, his bloody knuckles drawn back for a final blow.

Long Simons wet his hot lips and pumped for air. His voice sounded ridiculously small for so large a man as he weakly replied:

"Reg'lar full grown 'uns, Jim. Extry big 'uns. Belt's on th' ground some'ers."

CHAPTER VIII

ALONG THE RIVER TRAIL

BRIDGER now made every effort to reach the rendezvous on Green River ahead of the A. F. C. outfit. He hurried his company by Independence Rock, through the Devil's Gate, then up the Sweetwater for six days to the divide. Although it was uncomfortably warm on the plains the water in the camp-kettles was coated with a quarter of an inch of ice the night they camped on the divide.

Five days later they arrived at the Green—named Rio Verde by the Spanish explorers in 1818, and known as the Siskadee, or Prairie Hen, by the Crows. Camp was pitched a few miles from Horse Creek, and on the first day was invaded by several hundred Nez Percés and Flat-heads—who never flattened the head—and fully three hundred traders and trappers. Many of the trappers were Bridger's men who had win-

tered in the mountains. The others belonged to Nathaniel J. Wyeth's New England outfit, or were free trappers with small outfits.

A small tent was speedily erected for a saloon and Lander was appointed to handle the liquor trade, both whites and Indians being furious for drink. Lander was kept busy as long as he could stand on his feet, peddling out whisky at five dollars a pint. Then Papa Clair took his place.

There ensued the usual amount of fighting and gambling. Beaver pelts were the only medium of exchange, and as these were dumped on the buffalo robes of the gamblers, small fortunes quickly changed hands. Jim Baker, overfond of drink, set the pace for three days. Then Bridger went to him and suggested:

“'Bout enough for this time, eh, Jim?”

“I'm a derned fool. Lemme snooze an' I'll wake up sober's a b'iled owl.”

He was as good as his word and reported for active duty. He was desirous of getting clear of the camp and Bridger sent him to raise a cache of beaver near the mouth of Horse Creek.

The big spree ended and the wounds were dressed. The trappers began buying their outfits of blankets, red shirts, tobacco and trade trin-

kets. At the end of seven days Baker and his party returned with eight packs of beaver, running a hundred pounds to the pack and worth about ten dollars a pound in St. Louis.

Baker announced having seen Indian signs, several smokes, and said a large number of Blackfeet were watching the rendezvous through spies and were discouraged from attacking only because of the large number of reds and whites.

Lander, not given to drink, made an ideal whisky clerk from a trader's point of view. He found the work too repulsive and asked Bridger to give him other employment.

"Some one had to do it," said Bridger. "It's about all you can do. If no trader did it we could git beaver without it. But so long as one does it all must do it or make no trade. However I'll find something else for you."

If Bridger was inclined to resent Lander's fastidiousness he quickly changed when Black Arrow and a hundred braves rode into camp and announced that they had robes to trade, but would do business with no one but the Medicine Knife. Lander, under Bridger's tutelage, quickly traded the robes. Lander enjoyed this experience much as no liquor figured in the deal.

The Crows, like the Comanches far south, did not drink at this time, having yet to learn the vice through associating with the Assiniboins. Exchanging their robes only for goods, they were always well-dressed after the Indian fashion, wealthy in horses and quite the plutocrats of the Missouri Valley Indians.

While not the best examples of robe making the Crow robes were beautiful in workmanship, while as for the quantity the nation was the best producer of all the plains tribes. Bridger did not intend to transport the robes to St. Louis if he could possibly help it, and yet he planned to turn the trade to a good account.

After the robes were traded the Indians received many flattering offers for some of their horses. They refused to part with any of their animals with the exception of Black Arrow's offer of two ponies for Lander's knife. Lander refused and Bridger told him he was foolish.

Papa Clair gravely protested:

"Non, non, M'sieu Bridger. If only a piece of sharp steel—yes. But it is more than a knife. It is one of a family of five knives. It makes the heart stout; it brings good fortune."

"It's blame good medicine. I'll give my rifle for

it an' stand th' chance o' my medicine gettin' mad at it," spoke up Jim Baker.

Although much less superstitious than Baker there was the Indian's belief in medicine in Bridger, and he gravely offered Lander a hundred dollars gold for the weapon.

"It loses its medicine if it's sold," Lander explained.

Papa Clair heard these offers with much uneasy tugging at his mustaches. After the Indians had withdrawn he said:

"*M'sieu* Bridger, *M'sieu* Baker, you are my old friends. Now behold—I have four knives, all of the same family. I can not give a pointed weapon away. I can not sell it, as that kills its soul. But see! I will let each of you have one of the knives. Yes, I will do that. Whenever I want them back; if you have not lost them, I will ask and they become mine.

"They are very jealous. You must carry no other knife in the same belt. Best to wear them in the boot. And they are still mine."

"Derned if ye ain't all right!" joyously cried Baker. "My medicine didn't oughter rip and tear s'long as it's only lent to me. If ye ever want any ha'r raised jest call on Jim Baker."

Bridger, less demonstrative, caught the old man's hand and shook it warmly. It surprised Lander to see two such stout fighting men willing to attribute fetish powers to a piece of steel. He understood Papa Clair's sentiment concerning his knives and he catered to it. But here were two veteran mountain men eager to pay a rare price for what after all was a well-sharpened knife ornamented with silver.

Bridger interrupted his meditations by abruptly offering him four hundred dollars a year if he would return with the Crows to their home in the Big Horn Valley and live with them during the winter and collect their trade for the Rocky Mountain Fur Company.

"They like you. They reckon you're big medicine. Your knife has brought you good luck."

Lander hesitated and Bridger urged:

"You can't go back to St. Louis. You've got to winter out here somewheres. They'll treat you mighty fine, and you'll have a chance to prove that Jim Bridger didn't tell no lies when he talked about the Yellowstone country."

"If you go then I shall go with you, my friend," added Papa Clair. "Caves of war-paint! Name of a pipe!"

And his eyes glittered at the thought of new adventures in the marvelous country Bridger had so often described.

Lander wanted above all things to return to St. Louis in the fall. To go until another summer without seeing Susette was sickening to contemplate. Yet a dead man and the inimical shadow of the A. F. C. barred his homeward path.

"I'll think about it," he sighed. "I suppose it's the only thing I can do."

"I'll throw in a suit of black broadcloth—the best you can buy in St. Louis," added Bridger.

"It's a trade," sighed Lander, "unless my knife-medicine makes it possible for me to go back to St. Louis."

Bridger was highly pleased. He had reached the rendezvous ahead of the A. F. C. outfit and had secured the cream of the trade. He had made the Upper Missouri outfit admit his importance by sending their men to head him off and to compete with him. Now by extraordinary luck he stood in position to secure the bulk of the rich Crow trade. While enjoying these delectable feelings one of his men rode up and announced a small band was coming down the river with a white man in the lead.

"They'll be the A. F. C. outfit," said Bridger, and he smiled broadly.

"Rich pickin's they'll git," snorted Baker.

"I'm glad they've come," said Bridger. "I had them in mind while Lander was trading in the Crow robes for me. I don't want to pack 'em to St. Louis. The A. F. C. outfit will take 'em back to Fort Union rather than go empty-handed. Want to come along, Lander?"

Lander flushed with pleasure at the honor of this invitation and mounting his mule followed his chief up the river to meet the newcomers. There were a score of Indians, full bloods and breeds, in the outfit. One white man rode in advance. On beholding Bridger and Lander he spurred ahead to greet them.

Lander gave a loud cry and nearly fell from his mule. Bridger reined in and stared in amazement.

"Malcom Phinny!" he ejaculated.

"No one else," replied Phinny, smiling genially.

A wonderful wave of joy suffused Lander's whole being. By some miracle the dead was alive. The path to St. Louis and Susette was open. This tremendous discovery that no homicide was charged against him forced him to for-

get his rancor against Phinny. Never had he been so pleased to meet a man.

"Thought you was dead," he faltered.

"Head's thick," Phinny good-naturedly replied. "Bullet creased my skull. Unconscious for a bit. Men thought I was done for. I took the company's boat right after that fool Tilton went up on the *Golden Queen* to bother you. It was a fair fight and what he did wasn't any of my doings. I don't bring any quarrel up here against you. How's trade, Mr. Bridger?"

"Fair—I've got some mighty fine Crow robes you can have if you want 'em."

"Robes are good, but we're after beaver."

"Don't seem to be much beaver left. You oughter got here sooner."

Phinny swore and in deep disgust complained:

"That's what I told Mr. McKenzie, but he was so sure I'd be in time he held me back. What'll you take in trade for the robes?"

"Beaver, or an order on your St. Louis office for cash."

"Then it'll have to be an order at the market price. And, Lander, I'm really glad to see you. There's no fight between us, I repeat, so far as I'm concerned."

Admits it's foolish to bring a fight up here. Now there is nothing to stop me going back to St. Louis."

"No more duels!" gasped Papa Clair. "Name of a dog! It is good I am near the end of the trail. When I was young—bah!"

For some minutes he brooded on the decadence of the times, Lander humbly waiting for him to speak. Finally he showed some of his old spirit and philosophically declared:

"After all it is the fashion. It can be done. Men make high names by exploring. If they are called liars they can challenge. At least our winter in the Big Horn Valley will give us the chance to prove whether *M'sieu* Bridger spoke true.

"We will go to the Yellowstone. If we do not find the cave of war-paint I will challenge Bridger. *Sacré Bleu!* Is one to listen to such stories if they be false?"

"Papa Clair, don't you see there is no longer any need of my wintering with the Crows? I am free to return to St. Louis," reminded Lander.

With a groan of disgust Papa Clair turned aside and lamented: "Ever so! *M'm'selle's* eyes outshine the torch of glory; the torch of power.

"Well, well. Come, old man. One must have been a fool to be wise. Huh! Is it for you to talk? And behold, *M'sieu* Bridger will be the disappoint."

Lander surmised as much and it was with considerable misgivings that he went in search of his chief. He found him completing the transaction of the robes with Phinny. He waited until Phinny superintended the carrying away of the robes, but before he could speak another interruption occurred. This was a woebegone looking man, who announced he had just arrived from down-river.

"If you want a good man I'd like to hire out with you. I'm Ferguson of the H. B. I do not want to go back to headquarters. Blackfeet robbed me of forty packs of beaver. Once before I lost the season's furs."

"Lucky they didn't take your hair," said Bridger. "I'm afraid I can't hire you except as a trapper. I'll give you credit for an outfit."

Lander tugged Bridger's arm and drew him aside and whispered:

"Send him after the Crow trade. Seeing that I didn't kill Phinny I'm going back to St. Louis in the fall."

"The thunder you are!" exploded Bridger.
 "What am I paying you wages for?"

"Then I must go without any wages."

"How? I have no mules to spare for men who quit me."

"Then I'll walk."

Bridger grew calmer and studied him sharply.

"It's the little girl, I take it," he finally remarked. "Old Hurry-Up Parker's girl."

Lander confessed by coloring highly. Bridger frowned and pursed his lips. 'Abruptly he said:

"I've seen her. 'Bout as big as a kitten. She's turned your head. I don't blame you. You're a fool but you've got a mighty pretty excuse.

"See here, Ferguson, I can use you after all. You shall winter with the Crows and bring their hunt here next season. I'll take all their robes, but it's beaver I want. Git 'em after beaver. I'll draw up the papers later and Baker will git up your equipment."

"Thank you, Mr. Bridger. Perhaps you can give me a writing, saying I lost my furs to the Blackfeet. I'll send it to Fort Union by Mr. Phinny where one of the Red River breeds can take it up the Saskatchewan post. If the Black-

feet take the furs there in trade the company can seize 'em, as my marks are on the packs."

"I'll give you the writing," agreed Bridger. "Why not put in it a' agreement between me an' you as agent for the company, that if by any chance or risk I manage to git the furs back from the Blackfeet I pay the H. B. ten per cent. an' keep the rest. I don't stand a chance in a million of gettin' 'em. An' the H. B. has lost 'em for good."

Ferguson was eager to assent to this proposition, as he well knew the H. B. otherwise would never see the value of a single skin should the packs be recovered by any English or American traders. During the course of the day the agreement was drawn up and signed and given to Phinny, who promised to send it by express to the Saskatchewan post. This done, Ferguson was duly employed as Crow agent for the Rocky Mountain Company.

Lander walked on air as he moved about the camp and visualized his return to St. Louis. Hurry-Up Parker's hostility was forgotten. He had proved himself to himself and now felt confident to look any man in the eye. He had made the trip to the mountains. He would go to

Susette and, with her father's consent, determine the date of the wedding day. Parker would probably insist on a probationary term spent in the services of the A. F. C. Very good—he would reenter the employment of the A. F. C. and make good.

"Asleep?" broke in a voice.

Lander looked up and blinked at Phinny. The A. F. C. representative remarked:

"I've spoken to you three times. Say, I'm regular dished on this trip. Mr. McKenzie will feel like shipping me back to St. Louis for not getting here ahead of Mr. Bridger.

"But what could I do with that crazy breed to guide me; and he smuggling along some rum and getting drunk before we was clear of the Yellowstone and being laid up sick? He swore the Assiniboins put poison in his liquor before we quit the fort. Blames it on to old Gauche."

"He'll be mad because you didn't git here in time to make some of the trade?" asked Lander sympathetically.

"Like it? I'll probably be put back in that cussed store or sent down to Cabanne's post to handle what's left of the Pawnee trade. I'll be lucky if I'm not kicked out. Mr. McKenzie is

much worked up at the way Mr. Bridger is getting the beaver. The robes will help a little, only it'll be mighty hard work getting them back to Union."

Lander began to pity him. Also he disliked the idea of Phinny's returning to St. Louis. The man wanted to stay at Fort Union, and that was the one spot on earth Lander wished him to locate in permanently. Phinny continued:

"There is a chance for me to make good in a small way. One of the free trappers told my breed guide that he has a small cache of beaver three days up the river. If I can trade for them my trip won't seem so much of a failure. I'll make Mr. McKenzie think I traded them right out from under Mr. Bridger's nose.

"The trapper's mad at Bridger for refusing him credit, so the R. M. F. can't get them anyway. It's either the A. F. C. or that outfit of Connecticut Yankees under Wyeth. I'm going for them and I don't want to take any of my own men as they might blab at the fort that I got them easy instead of getting the best of Mr. Bridger in open trade. My breed will guide me.

"One of your men, Porker, is willing to go with me if Mr. Bridger is willing. If you'd go

along you'd be helping me out a lot—Lord knows you ain't got any reason to feel friendly toward me."

"That's all right," said Lander, eager to help him establish a secure standing at Fort Union, yet scarcely relishing the trip. "Porker wouldn't dare go without the boss' consent; neither would I."

"That's just the reason why I come to you. I want you to put it up to Mr. Bridger. If he'll let you two men go I'll return to Union with a bit of credit as a trader, and when Mr. Bridger wants to trade more robes he'll find me the man to deal with."

"Would you go and return inside of six days?" mused Lander.

"Easy. Good trail, the breed says, and the man's waiting to turn them over."

Lander placed the proposition before Bridger, who smiled in deep amusement at Phinny's naive confession—that he wished to appear as outwitting the head of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company in a matter of trade. It was characteristic of his kindly heart that he should readily consent, saying:

"If it'll help him any—yes. I owe him a good

turn for taking the robes. They'd been —— an' repeat to pack to St. Louis. Call it a holiday and go with him.

"Long Simons says there is no signs of hostiles within fifty miles of us. Baker isn't so sure, but his Snake friends have been reading their medicine and filling him up. Too many friendly Injuns and trappers here for the Blackfeet to be sneaking round.

"It's Bill Tracy who's got the furs. There's eight or ten packs, and the R. M. F. isn't passing 'em by ordinarily. He's sore because I wouldn't let him have a keg of liquor on credit. I offered an outfit but he wanted the rum.

"He offered the cache to the New England outfit, but Wyeth was suspicious an' wouldn't dicker unless the packs was fetched in here. Take a mule an' go ahead."

"Can Papa Clair go with us?"

"No, siree! Think I come up here to work for the A. F. C.? You can go as you're not any help just now. Papa Clair is always a help. An' be back at the end of the sixth day or you'll find us gone.

"We're 'bout to split up into small parties. The A. F. C. will try to tag us round, and I may make

a jump clear into the Blackfoot country. Then let them follow an' lose their hair."

Lander said nothing about Porker. Bridger's tone did not invite further requests. Very possibly Phinny had agreed to pay Porker well and the man would undertake the trip without permission. But that was Porker's affair. Returning to Phinny he reported the results of his mission and reminded him that he must be back in six days.

"We can make it easy. I've already started old Deschamps ahead to make the packs ready for the mules. He took two mules besides the one he is riding. His trail will be easy to follow if Porker can't go.

"Sorry you didn't ask about Porker, but Mr. Bridger might have said, 'No.' You don't care if Porker goes without asking?"

"Nothing to me as I don't know anything about it. If he goes I shall take it for granted he got permission," said Lander with a smile.

Papa Clair and Long Simons were about to depart in search of beaver country along the various small tributaries of the Green. Lander wished he were going with them. Jim Baker was visiting the Snake Indians, now camped ten miles

below the rendezvous. Clair and Simons did not suggest that Lander go with them, and he did not feel called on to speak of his trip with Phinny.

The man Porker was busily cleaning his rifle and sharpening his knife and gave Lander a knowing glance. There was no doubt about Porker making the trip to Tracy's cache.

The first night out was very warm. The men had not bothered to bring any tent, and although a canvas is but a frail protection Lander wished he had something for shelter. Porker laughed at him. Phinny smiled more politely.

"It's the wolves," Lander explained, feeling sheepish because of his squeamishness.

"Wolves!" guffawed Porker. "A mountain man don't keer a cuss for all th' wolves this side o' Tophet."

"Old mountain men tell me the wolves are quite harmless unless starving," Phinny said.

"I'm not entirely an idiot," assured Lander with a laugh. "I'm not afraid of wolves that act natural. But several times to-day when I was riding behind, one big fellow almost passed under my horse and took a snap at my heel. He was too fat to be hungry, but he was keen to bite. Now wolves don't act that way."

Porker's merriment vanished and he glanced uneasily about their camp.

"Mad wolf—that's what he was," he mumbled. "They do git pestiferous this time o' year. Two seasons ago they bit a bull that belonged to th' A. F. C. outfit. We was bringin' up th' bull an' six cows. Bull went mad. I don't wanter see any sight like that again!"

"I thought that was all stuff," said Phinny, peering anxiously about. "Must be wolves that's hungry."

"No, sir!" emphatically denied Porker. "They'll go right by dead buf'ler. All they wanter do is to bite something. I was with a' outfit on th' Sweetwater when a big gray feller sneaked into our camp an' bit th' stock. We had tents an' I hope to die if he didn't come into one tent three times in one night. We had orders not to shoot; th' boss thinkin' we'd kill each other, or th' mules.

"Twice th' fellers drove him out with heavin' things at him, but th' last trip they was all asleep, and he chewed George Holmes on th' ear 'n' face somethin' cruel. Holmes begin to say he was goin' mad. Got so bad he wouldn't cross water till we'd covered him with blankets. Then one

day he had fits, an' that night threw away his clothes an' run off, an' was never seen since."

"Don't!" shivered Lander. "I'll sleep in a tree if you keep on."

"Yes, that's enough," growled Phinny. "Lucky if they don't git in and bite the mules."

"If they try that they'll be lucky not to have their derved heads kicked off. We'll keep a fire an' stand watch. Fire won't skeer 'em if they're mad, but it'll give a light to shoot by."

It fell to Lander to stand the first watch and he was glad as he was too nervous to sleep. He patrolled back and forth for an hour, pausing only to replenish the small fire, and then sat down satisfied the night would pass without any intrusions.

Something whitish-gray, moving noiselessly so far as his ears were able to register, passed by him and toward the mules. For a second he believed it was imagination; then the mules set up a fearful braying and kicking, and thinking he glimpsed the furtive shape he discharged his rifle.

Phinny and Porker came to their feet and snatched up their weapons.

"What is it?" roared Porker.

"Wolf!" yelled Lander, rushing toward the mules and expecting to find the terrible visitor dead. But he could not find even a drop of blood.

His companions swore fretfully as he returned to the fire, and insisted he had dreamed it. Lander angrily asked if they believed the mules also had dreamed it. But his companions had heard only the rifle-shot and believed it was that which frightened the mules.

"Jest tuck this inter yer pipe an' smoke it," warned Porker. "No more shootin' in this camp. Ye'll be pottin' either me or Phinny next. It's all right to heave a' ax, but this sprinklin' lead round every time ye have a bad dream——"

"Oh, shut up! If you two say not to fire—all right, I won't fire. But if you get nipped don't blame me."

"We certainly haven't any right to find fault with you," mollified Phinny. "Reckon we're all rather nervous. Only thing I heard was the shot, then the mules, and it scared me blue. But we'll all agree to shoot off no guns in camp. It might fetch some small band of Injuns down on us."

Irritated at the fault-finding, Lander sullenly completed his watch and aroused Porker. The

latter asked if there had been any signs of a wolf, and Lander growled a negative. Porker lighted his pipe and took his turn. When he called Phinny it was growing light in the east.

"Reckon ye won't have much to do," yawned Porker, returning to his blankets.

Phinny walked about until thoroughly awake; then discovered the mules were acting uneasy and went to them. As he came up they milled about and lashed out with their heels. Something darted by him and he leaped aside and heard, or fancied he heard, the click of poisonous teeth. In another moment Porker screamed and staggered to his feet, firing his rifle blindly and sending the ball near Phinny's head.

"You fool! Trying to kill me?" roared Phinny.

"Oh, God!" cried Porker, whirling frantically about. "Th' wolf bit me! Now I'll go mad!"

"Nonsense!" yelped Phinny, his voice quavering with fear.

Lander came out of his blankets and taking in the situation demanded, "Let me look at you."

He turned Porker about and felt the massive form trembling violently. There was no doubt but that something had bitten him, for his chin

was covered with blood. Lander stirred up the fire, threw on some dry stalks and washed the blood away and found the marks of teeth. Thrusting a ramrod into the fire, he heated it and cauterized the wounds, and encouraged him.

"It's nothing. Skin barely broken. You'll be all right. Probably some kind of a rat."

Phinny knew better, but held his tongue. As the day broke he secretly studied the mountain man as if expecting to behold immediate symptoms of hydrophobia. Under Lander's cheerful encouragement Porker recovered his composure and affected to have no fears. Yet when he filled his pipe his big hands trembled, and more than once he sought to study his lacerated face in pools of water.

Their course lay up the Green, and they found the traveling easy with a broad trail left by Deschamps and his mules. The finding of several broken arrow-shafts told them it was a thoroughfare for the Indians. Porker examined the shafts and said they had weathered for at least one season.

Throughout the day Porker was normal in his bearing, but toward sundown he became silent, which was not characteristic of him. Once a

gray form flashed across the trail ahead and he shook in a paroxysm of fear. However, he managed to keep his nerves well under control. He bolted his supper hurriedly and although it was his turn to stand the first watch he rolled up in his blankets.

"He's powerful scared," whispered Lander. "You wake me for the second watch and we'll let him sleep through. A full sleep will fix him all right."

This was done and Lander found nothing to disturb his dreams of Susette until near morning. He was half-way through the extra watch and thinking of the girl, marking time until it should grow light enough for him to start the breakfast, when a dirty gray form flashed from cover and streaked toward the camp. Instinctively his rifle flew up and discharged, and the gray patch took to the air and came down within a few feet of Porker. Both Porker and Phinny sprang erect at the shot.

"I got him this time!" cried Lander pointing.

It was a big gray wolf, and its jaws, agape, were hideous to contemplate. This time neither of his companions found any fault with his shooting.

"Same feller that nipped me," shuddered Porker. Then hopefully: "Some say ye ain't in any danger if ye kill th' cuss."

"That's right," heartily agreed Lander. "Besides, I burned all the poison out."

"I don't count much on th' burnin'. Took too long for th' iron to heat. What ye oughter done was rub in gunpowder an' touch it off. Wal, I'm derned glad he's dead, an' let's be gittin' away from here."

It was with difficulty that they induced him to wait until they had eaten. He refused to touch any food.

"Eat something," insisted Phinny.

"Curse ye, I ain't hungry!" snarled Porker, striding to the mules and beginning to saddle up.

Phinny looked at Lander inquiringly.

"I don't know any more than you do," said Lander. "Bridger and Baker say mad wolves will pass by food and seem keen only to bite something. I don't even know that that dead brute was mad; or if he was if he's the same one that bit Porker. But if Porker gets to thinking things hard enough he'll go mad."

They mounted, and Porker, contrary to his usual custom, rode some distance ahead of his

companions. According to Lander's reckoning they were almost up to the cache.

Phinny watched Porker steadily. It was easy to read Phinny's mind by watching his eyes. He was afraid of the big man ahead. Porker, usually so gregarious, now seemed loath to come near them, and when Lander did manage to ride abreast of him and manage to catch his gaze he saw that which made him willing to drop back with Phinny.

Near sundown a man came galloping a mule down the river bank. Lander covered him with his rifle, but Phinny called out:

"Don't shoot! It's old Deschamps!"

The breed came on, his wily eyes instantly detecting constraint in the three men. He glanced askance at Porker, who kept to one side and made no move to join his mates. In an undertone and speaking rapidly Phinny explained what had happened.

"Bad," grunted Deschamps. "Better kill 'um." And he fingered his gun.

"No, no!" hissed Phinny. "He'll be all right if he gets over his scare."

Deschamps, who understood English much better than he could speak it, nodded his head slowly.

Lander, who was anxious to have done with the disagreeable trip and its possible tragedy, asked:

"How far to the cache?"

Deschamps eyed him stolidly as if not understanding. Phinny repeated the query sternly. With a sullen duck of his head the breed held up one finger.

"One day!" cried Lander in disgust. "It won't do. We should be turning back to-morrow."

"One sleep," corrected Deschamps.

"Means we can camp here to-night, raise the cache to-morrow and start back," said Phinny. "It must be near as he has left the pack mules there."

"Sleep, then go. Mules there," grunted Deschamps.

They called to Porker and told him their plans. He made no reply but hobbled the mules. He made no offer to help with the evening meal, but after some meat had broiled he seized a portion and withdrew and attacked it ravenously for a few minutes; then seemed to lose his appetite.

Suddenly he began to laugh, not his usual boisterous guffaw, but a strident, interminable cackling with a peculiar metallic quality in his voice.

Lander was frozen with horror, and Phinny stealthily reached for his rifle. Old Deschamps effaced himself in a clump of bushes.

"What's the matter, man?" sharply demanded Lander. "Stop it and light your pipe."

"Light my pipe, ye pasty-faced pet o' Jim Bridger's," croaked Porker, twisting his thick lips in a most grotesque manner as if each word had to be dislodged by force. "By this time to-morrer I'll be lightin' my pipe in the other world an' yer ha'r'll be hangin' in a Blackfoot lodge."

"Shut up that fool talk!" shrilly commanded Phinny, drawing the gun to his side.

Porker was seized with a convulsion of laughter. His mirth was titanic and of a horrible quality. Pointing a quivering finger at the dazed Lander he shrieked:

"Ye poor fool! Tried to make it hot for me in Bridger's outfit, eh? Wal, here ye be only a few feet behind ol' Porker when he takes th' long trail.

"Goin' back to St. Louis, be ye? Yer hide will be tanned by Blackfoot smoke. They'll find me mad as th' mad wolf what bit me. They'll find ye——"

Phinny fired and Porker went down on his face.

"Why did you do that?" gasped Lander, breaking into a clammy sweat.

"He's gone mad!" panted Phinny, working with desperate haste to reload. "It was his life or ours."

"He said they'd find me—wish he'd finished," muttered Lander.

"Crazy talk. Hand me that ramrod," puffed Phinny, his hands shaking.

Lander stooped and reached for the ramrod. The bushes stirred and he started to lift his head. Then a crash and nothingness.

CHAPTER IX

IN THE MEDICINE LODGE

WHEN Lander came to his senses he was hanging across a pony, unable to move a limb, and the rapid motion of the animal caused him exquisite torment. His head felt as if it were about to burst and he tried to twist it up to relieve the blood-pressure.

There was the sound of many horses around him and it was night. There was a great roaring in his ears that was not made by nature or his unseen companions.

Finally he caught the guttural voices of Indians and vaguely comprehended his plight. Phinny had shot Porker; then the Indians came from ambush and knocked them in the head. Whether Phinny was a captive or dead he had no idea.

The Crows would rob white men but were loath to kill them. The fact he had been struck

down by some blunt instrument and not permanently harmed suggested Crows as his captors. But he could not believe they were from Black Arrow's band. The chief expected him to winter with the tribe and would gain nothing by making him a prisoner.

Also there were Nez Percés, Flatheads and Snakes in and about the rendezvous; but these tribes were friendly with the whites and seldom bothered them even when engaged in tribal wars. This left the Blackfeet, who were known to be gathered near the Three Tetons in great numbers, and who doubtless were sending small bands down the Sweetwater and Green to pick off stray victims.

He decided he must be in the power of the Siksika, or Blackfeet. Even a store-man in St. Louis must know the history of this tribe's unrelenting hatred for Americans. The bulk of Kit Carson's Indian fights were with these people. The Sioux tribes and their treacherous tenants, the Aricaras, were bad enough, but with these tribes there were lulls—peaceful intervals when boats ascended the river without being attacked.

Not so with the Blackfeet. To meet an American band of trappers was the signal for battle.

They carried their trade to the H. B. posts in Canada, or turned it over to outposts below the national boundary line. With the Americans they would have nothing but war.

Bridger and his associates usually spoke of their country as the "butcher-shop," and what beaver was taken above the Milk was usually accompanied by running fights—the white men retreating.

If the Blackfeet denied themselves trade privileges with the American traders they were never tempted, as were the Assiniboin, to exchange all their robes for diluted alcohol in weather when Indians ponies froze to death standing up. If they lost warriors by white men's bullets, they lost less than many other tribes did through disease. Lander knew if he was a captive of this terrible people he stood no chance of being adopted or ransomed, but must die beneath all the torture his captors' hideous ingenuity could provide.

He groaned dismally, and instantly a hand rested on his neck. Soon the ponies came to a halt and he was untied from his mount and dumped on the ground like a pack of skins. With the breath knocked from his body and in immi-

nent danger of being trampled on in the darkness, still he felt immeasurably better as the blood cleared from his head.

No attention was given him except as some man ran his fingers over his person to make sure the thongs were secure. Next the ponies were led to one side and the warriors threw themselves on the ground, and the camp became quiet. Lander worked at his bonds only to find the slightest movement brought a hand fumbling at the knots.

As he persisted the edge of a knife was placed against his throat. After this threat he remained very quiet. Despite his fears and tortured position he dozed off at last, and when much commotion aroused him it was early morning and his captors were preparing to resume their journey.

The expedition was in command of the Black-foot military organization, the Ikunuhkahtsi—All Comrades—and the strictest obedience was given the orders of the leader. This man was short and thick-set, and wore several necklaces of grizzly-bear teeth.

No attention was paid the prisoner until after the men had eaten. Then he was jerked to his feet and thrown astride a horse. Neither food nor water was offered him.

Once he had gazed about, his stomach revolted at the thought of food. Around the necks of several horses, and including his own mount, were tied the freshly severed hands and feet of Indians. The band had been in a fight with some of the plains tribes and were bringing home the trophies. The leader carried a tall lance, and tied to the top of this were several scalps. They rode due north toward the Gros Ventres Range, making for the heart of the mountains. Suffering horribly from thirst but not daring to ask for water, Lander clenched his teeth and stared straight ahead, trying to hold his head high that his gaze might escape the gruesome decorations around his pony's neck.

Although he did not know it this bearing favorably impressed his captors, who interpreted it as the index of a high and haughty spirit. Had they realized it was due to a weak heart and faint stomach they probably would have slain him on the spot.

At midday they halted at a waterhole and a warrior held up a leather bucket filled to the brim, and motioned for Lander to drink. As he eagerly accepted the invitation the bucket was placed upside down on his head. He fell from

his horse and nearly choked to death. The joke was hailed with much laughter.

Desperate and only anxious to have it quickly over with, Lander forgot to be afraid, and bowing his head he butted his tormentor in the face, smashing his nose and lips and hurling him into the hole. The savage scrambled out and came at him with drawn knife. The leader yelled an order and several braves seized the infuriated man and held him back.

Then another warrior filled the bucket and allowed Lander to drink. In all his life he had never known such exquisite pleasure as when the ice-cold water filled his parched and feverish throat. Some jerked meat was next offered him, but he was unable to eat with his arms strapped to his sides.

The leader again spoke, and his cramped limbs were released. He had thought it impossible to eat fresh bull-meat in Bridger's camp; now he made short work of long strings of tough, bark-like substance. As he bolted the leathery ration he discovered he could look on the ghastly trophies without feeling squeamish.

He rode the whole afternoon without any great discomfort. Now that he had eaten and drunk

he began to scheme to escape. They had deprived him of his rifle and belt, the latter containing a short skinning-knife. But they had not thought to remove his boots, and Papa Clair's long gift blade still reposed in its scabbard.

The day's journey terminated once the band had passed through a narrow cañon and had entered a circular pocket several miles in diameter. Here seemed to be a permanent camp, possibly the advance of the main body of the Three Tetons, seeking small bands of trappers before returning to the home country at the sources of the Missouri. That they had no fears of surprise attacks was shown by their relaxation once they came up to the skin tents, where the women rushed out to greet them.

The scalps were given to the squaws to dance and trample upon. The trophies were removed from the horses and elevated upon lances and poles and became centers of much derisive attention. The squaws attempted to get at Lander but were bundled aside by the men. He was uncereemoniously thrown to the ground and pegged out in spread-eagle fashion.

After the kettles of meat had cooked, two warriors released his arms and allowed him to sit

up to eat. He found the meat tender and savory despite the lack of salt. Suddenly become a fatalist, he decided he would die on a full stomach, and quickly devoured a large quantity. He was allowed to drink, then was thrown and pegged out.

While sitting up he had gained a glimpse of the camp and saw it was a large one. The leather tents were uniform in size and pattern. Directly behind him, and so near he could almost touch it with his outstretched hand, was an unusually large lodge, oblong in shape.

Night came abruptly to the pocket. Numerous small fires were lighted. Lander was watching the silhouettes pass between him and the fires when he was startled to hear a voice near his head sigh, "Alas, *m'sieu!*"

"Papa Clair!" he softly ejaculated.

"Baptiste Gardepied—talk French?"

Lander eagerly asked in French, "What will they do with me, *M'sieu* Gardepied?"

"To-morrow. It will be very sad and cruel. May the Old Man give you strength."

"But you are not an Indian. What do you do here? Where are you?"

"I am in the big medicine-lodge. My mother

was an Arapaho, my father a French trader. The Arapahoes are friends to the Blackfeet. I married a Blackfoot woman. I have worked at Fort Union, but came here when Deschamps and his rascal sons said they would kill me.

"The Blackfeet say it was Deschamps who brought them down on you. He met one of their scouts and said he would make a smoke signal to show your camp."

"Deschamps? He betrayed me to the Indians? He was guiding Malcom Phinny——"

"Ah, *M'sieu* Phinny! He is one bad one. He is now at Fort Union, but he brought much news of Bridger. The A. F. C. do not like *M'sieu* Bridger's way of getting the beaver. If I were *M'sieu* Bridger I would never walk ahead of a Deschamps or a Rem."

"But if Deschamps betrayed me, then Phinny betrayed me," gasped Lander.

"But why not? Does *M'sieu* Phinny love you? When he came to Fort Union he was quick to get thick with Deschamps. It is said he will marry one of the old man's wildcat daughters when he returns to the fort."

"You must get me out of this," gritted Lander.

"It is my life if they know I cut your cords. It

may be death if they knew I was in the medicine-tent. Not even the warriors dare come in here where they keep the sacred bundles. And if I cut you free you will be taken again."

"I have a knife in my boot. I know how to use it. I can die fighting and not at the hands of a squaw."

"Psst! Be quiet—some one comes."

Lander saw the figure approaching from one of the fires. The man dropped at his side and examined his bonds and made sure the pegs were holding. Then he rose and with a guttural exclamation struck the prisoner in the face. He hesitated after the blow, muttered fiercely, then turned back to the fire.

"Curse him!" panted Lander through his bloody lips.

"He says you broke his nose," whispered Gardepied. "And—well, we shall see what we shall see. It will be better to die fighting, of course. Oh, much better!"

"What else did he say?" demanded Lander.

"He spoke of the green rawhide torture. As it dries it shrinks and holds like iron. They fasten the stone heads on their war-clubs with it. It is all too cruel to talk about. I am part Arapaho

—I marry a Blackfoot woman. But I remember I am half white.

“Yes, it is much better for you to die fighting, *m’sieu*. The white blood in me says I must give you that chance.”

“Then in God’s mercy cut these cords,” panted Lander, beginning a useless struggle.

“What would you have? Death now? Wait a bit. I must leave the medicine-tent and go to the fire and show myself and then go to my lodge. They will think I have turned in for the night.

“Then I will come back and reach from under the flap of the tent and cut your arms free. I can not reach your legs, but you say you have a knife. Use it, and make for the hole through the hills. I fear you will not get far, but knowing what I know, you will have much to thank Baptiste Gardepied for when you go down fighting.”

“Do not fail me,” mumbled Lander.

The breed no longer talked and Lander knew the medicine-lodge was empty. He closed his eyes and fell to thinking of Susette. Then came thoughts of Papa Clair, his friend; of Jim Bridger, generous and kind.

It was all clear to him now. Phinny had played him false, and had planned to do so from the start. Porker was in the scheme, and Phinny had killed him to prevent his tattling the truth.

Deschamps had joined the three white men and it was his hand that had reached from the bushes and struck Lander senseless. They had left him tied in the trail for the Blackfeet to find and kill by inches.

The groups about the fires sang and danced, or listened to some warrior reciting his coups. None of the squaws ventured near the prisoner; he was being saved for the morrow's sport. At regular intervals a brave would examine his bonds.

He waited more than an hour for Gardepied to return; then exhaustion overcame him and he dozed. He was always conscious of the thongs tugging at his arms and legs, and yet he slept and woke up and slept again. After one troubled nap he opened his eyes and realized he had slumbered for some time.

Gray mists were rising from the pocket, and the tops of the western peaks were reflecting the first lights of dawn. With terrible dismay he realized the night had passed and that Gardepied *had not* given him his chance to die fighting.

He rolled his head in hope of glimpsing the form of the breed stealthily making a belated approach. With the exception of a dozen guards, who sat muffled in their blankets, the camp still slept.

As Lander rolled his head from side to side he was obsessed by the absurd fancy that a bush moved a few feet. He knew this was his imagination, yet he marked the position of the bush well before glancing to the opposite side.

Once more he saw a bush glide ahead. The miracle had happened on his right and left. He darted his gaze back to the first bush, and most surely it was advancing, or else he was out of his head. Not only that but bushes throughout the level floor of the pocket were shifting their positions.

One of the guards let his blanket fall to his loins and stared earnestly over the eastern side of the pocket. It was as if he had sensed danger. As the chill of early morning struck home he gathered the blanket about him and by degrees his head sank on his chest again.

Lander thrilled in anticipation of something about to happen. The floor of the pocket was dotted with isolated clumps of bushes and those

growing singly. On both the west and east the miracle was being repeated and bushes advanced closer about the camp circle.

"M'sieu!"

It came as soft as the murmuring of the morning breeze.

Lander shook his head to show he was awake.

"Do not move when I cut the thong," came the warning.

Then the horrible drag on his right arm ceased, and he no longer felt as if it were being pulled from the socket. And, oh, the luxury of feeling it relax—of feeling the blood prickling through the veins to revive the benumbed hand! It required all his will power to refrain from flexing the muscles and hugging the outraged limb to his side.

But the guard was out of his blanket again and staring curiously over the plain. It seemed ages before he slipped back into his blanket. Then the heavenly relaxation of his left arm marked the completion of Gardepied's charity, or response to the call of his white blood.

Working his fingers until he had ousted the prickly sensation, Lander darted his right hand to his boot and pulled his knife. Rising and bend-



"The bushes move!" gasped the breed.

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ASTOR, LENOX AND
TILDEN FOUNDATIONS

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ing half double, he slashed twice and lay back, his legs free.

"Napi, the Old Man, help us! The bushes move!" gasped the voice of the breed.

A guard rose up, threw aside his blanket and stared sharply over the plain. Something caught his attention and he bent forward to scrutinize it more closely.

He straightened and threw back his head, but the streak through the air, beginning at the nearest bush and ending in his throat, permitted only a gasping, gurgling cry to escape his lips. However, another guard saw him fall with the arrow through his neck and yelled an alarm.

Instantly the bushes rose in the air, revealing human forms beneath them—warriors with bushes tied to their heads. A cloud of arrows hissed into camp and stung the sleepers, biting several to death; and the hoarse war-cry of the Crows completed the camp's dismay. On the west side of the pocket commenced the same mode of attack, while down at the mouth of the narrow cañon sounded the loud battle yell of white men.

With a backward squirm Lander gained the side of the medicine-lodge and raising a flap rolled inside. He heard a noise on the opposite

side of the lodge, but could see nothing as the interior of the place was piled high with packs. Passing round the barrier he saw a flap fall in place, and peering out beheld the breed running north and away from the fighting.

Returning to the south side of the lodge, Lander cut a slit in the wall and beheld the camp in an uproar. The surprise attack had for a few minutes thrown the Blackfeet into a panic. Now they were recovering their morale. Some rushed to gather in the horses, but were beaten back by many arrows. On both sides the Crows began to increase the pressure.

The Blackfeet in two long lines faced in two directions. Their chief rode up and down between the lines, exhorting his men to die like warriors. The squaws, very demons, rushed back and forth, bringing fresh quivers, or darting out and dragging their wounded tribesmen inside the lines.

The Crows were now on the ground, still masked by the bushes. The Blackfeet ceased to fall back. One line suddenly rushed ahead, and Lander's heart jumped violently as he beheld the front of the bushes drawing back. But before the Blackfeet could score any advantage a flying

mass of trappers struck the tips of the double lines, their rifles and pistols reechoing viciously.

Some of the squaws managed to bring up a few horses at the risk of their lives, and warriors mounted these and rode down to slow up the advance of the whites. One old hag with her gray hair streaming in the morning breeze remembered the prisoner, and with eldritch shrieks darted around the medicine-lodge with a knife in her skinny hand and dropped on her knees and raised the blade. She stared at the empty ground stupidly, then cried out with such malignant intensity as to make Lander's blood curdle.

Other women rushed up. Lander passed to the other side of the tent, thinking to escape, but found the Blackfeet in retreating had cut him off. The big lodge occupied the middle of the battleground and was now entirely surrounded. Turning to the packs and working with desperate vigor, Lander rearranged them in a high breast-work around him. As he finished the barricade the lodge coverings began to vanish as mounted horsemen paused long enough to salvage the sacred hides.

An Indian with a swollen nose glimpsed Lander's head disappearing behind the packs, and

with a howl of fury climbed up the barrier, a war-ax in his hand. For a few seconds the brave endured the white man's masterly knife-play, chopping ineffectively, then went down at the foot of the barricade and dreamed no more of battle.

Others of the Blackfeet had witnessed the brief duel, but there was none who had time to attack the prisoner. Now that his hiding-place was discovered Lander recklessly showed himself and waved his arms and yelled:

"Papa Clair! Jim Bridger! Jim Baker!"

"God is good!" cried Papa Clair, swerving his horse between two bucks and making for the stack of packs. He rode with the reins in his teeth, almost with his knees in the saddle, a knife in each hand. And as he pressed forward he leaned far to right and left, his terrible knives etching a red trail. Emboldened by the coming of the whites, the Crows threw aside their head-coverings of bushes and advanced more boldly.

The Blackfeet were now awake to their danger and fought a vicious rear-guard action. Their chief was among the last to fall back. He kept taunting his enemies, and as his words were heard the Crows slightly lessened the impetuosity of *their* advance.

Papa Clair leaped from his horse, joined Lander behind the packs and interpreted: "The chief is telling us that there are eight hundred Blackfeet a short distance north of here, that they will soon come and give us all the fight we want."

"This crowd is licked!" joyously cried Lander, hardly able to realize the sudden change in his fortunes.

"They're falling back in good order," corrected Papa Clair. "They even took the hide coverings of this, their medicine-lodge. By this time they've seen we have only thirty white men and that our Crows are losing stomach. We can't drive them far. Ah, hear the Crows! They've found the feet and hands of their people. The Blackfeet surprised a small party of Black Arrow's scouts and cut off their limbs. The Crows were on the trail when we overtook them.

"*M'sieu* Phinny and Deschamps brought us word of being attacked; of you and Porker being killed. *M'sieu* Baker had just come from the Snake camp. We came with what force we had."

"Where's Phinny and Deschamps?" asked Lander.

"Eh? Who knows? I gave them no thought once we got word you were killed."

CHAPTER X

AT FORT UNION

BRIDGER galloped up and silently wrung Lander by the hand. Jim Baker, intoxicated with joy, waved a big knife and yelled for Lander to catch a horse and join in the pursuit. But Bridger began shouting:

"We must turn back. There is a large party of Blackfeet near here. The old chief did not lie. We've got our man. Round up their horses. Land of life! What's these packs?"

For the first time he noticed the nature of Lander's barricade. Lander explained:

"I think they're the forty packs the Blackfeet took from Ferguson, the H. B. man. If he is here he can tell them."

"I'm glad to say he isn't here," said Bridger.

He quickly examined a pack and announced:

"The H. B. pelts sure enough. Ferguson's mark is on 'em. Rustle for horses, boys; we'll

use the mules for packing these to camp. Papa Clair, you and Lander see to loading them. I must crowd the fighting a little more. Git after 'em, Jim Baker. Give 'em their needin's, men. Take the fight out of them. We must have time to load forty packs of prime beaver."

"Ain't that younker's medicine all ——, Jim?" bawled Baker as he dashed away to force the fighting.

Under Papa Clair's direction Lander and a score of Crows rounded up what horses were not yet captured. The Crows had left their own animals outside the pocket, and now once more in the saddle they attacked the retreating enemy more confidently, their big bows twanging out the death sentence. And as they formed in a long line across the pocket the trappers fell back and exchanged their mules for ponies.

As fast as the mules were brought to him Papa Clair superintended the loading of them—two hundred pounds to each animal—and worked as serenely as he would have in the big camp. In short time the cavalcade began retiring toward the cañon; the trappers coming next with a screen of Crows to discourage counter-attacks.

The Blackfeet had lost virtually all their stock

and were poorly situated for taking the offensive. Bridger called out to Black Arrow that he and his braves should have the bulk of the horses, but the chief seemed more interested in securing the poles of the medicine-lodge. The poles were lashed to ponies in form of a travois and on them was piled a miscellany of camp equipment. Jim Baker viewed the poles with considerable reverence and confided to Lander they were better medicine than all the horses and pelts.

The escape from the pocket was made without any confusion, but once the mules were through the narrow opening the Blackfeet made a vigorous charge, knowing the Crows must pass through the exit in a mass. Bridger wheeled about and led his mounted riflemen in a wild charge, and scattered and drove the enemy to the end of the pocket. This time the Blackfeet decided they had had enough of fighting and contented themselves with climbing the surrounding heights and making many smoke signals.

Since taking refuge in the medicine-lodge Lander had seen nothing of Gardepied. None of the trappers had seen him during the fight. Once back on the Green the horses were given to the Crows after Bridger had taken one for each of

his men. As there were some three hundred animals, all in prime condition, the Crows' sorrow over the fate of their tribesmen was somewhat assuaged.

"You shall receive something worth while from the sale of the beaver," Bridger informed Lander.

"Good lord! I'm satisfied with receiving my life back," shuddered Lander. "I shall never forget the women. They were terrible."

"Leave it to me to fix the terms. An' speaking of women, when a man marries he likes to have something besides high hopes. We must show our heels a bit faster, boys."

"You think they'll be following us?" asked Lander anxiously, thinking of the chief's threat to bring eight hundred men.

"They'll follow when they can. What worries me is two white men—not the Blackfoot nation. I don't like the notion of having left Phinny and Ferguson in camp together."

As they rode down the river Lander related his experience to Bridger and insisted Phinny and Porker had planned his death.

"Don't doubt it," coolly agreed Bridger. "But Porker's dead an' we can't prove anything on Phinny. *Treat him just as if you didn't suspect*

nothing. Time enough to pay him up after we git these packs to St. Louis."

When the band arrived at the rendezvous they found the Snakes and Nez Percés had flocked in to fight their ancient enemy if necessary. Phinny and Ferguson had departed. They had traded with Nez Percés for some crippled ponies and some mules and had packed the buffalo-ropes on these.

They had started for Fort Union, having hired a score of the Nez Percés to act as body-guard until in the heart of the Crow country. With the Nez Percés supplementing the Indians and breeds Phinny had brought with him, he would stand in no danger of an attack unless he encountered an overwhelming force.

The fact that Ferguson had gone with Phinny was very disquieting to Bridger. He immediately called Baker, Papa Clair, Long Simons and Lander to his tent and tersely explained the situation. In conclusion he said:

"Ferguson has gone back on his bargain to winter in the Crow country for the Rocky Mountain Fur Company. Phinny has offered him a good position with the A. F. C.

"Ferguson will be sure to tell McKenzie how

he lost his furs to the Blackfeet and of his deal with me. McKenzie has an old man, Jake Berger, for a hunter. Berger used to work for the H. B. at their North Saskatchewan post—Fort of the Prairie. He got well acquainted with the Blackfeet, who carried their trade there. He is the one white man on the Missouri that can go to the butcher-shop and stand a chance of bringing his hair home.

“McKenzie will be sure to send him up the Missouri to dicker for the forty packs. As soon as Berger strikes any Blackfeet he’ll learn about this fight and the loss of the packs.

“Now this is what we must do: I must reach Fort Union and buy a keelboat and have it ready for a flying start from the mouth of the Yallerstone before McKenzie can hear we captured the packs. So I will go ahead with Lander. As we shall go down the Big Horn we’ll have the Crows for company most of the trip.

“Papa Clair with a dozen men will bring the pack mules through the mountains to the Big Horn, where he will make bull-boats and fetch the packs down to the Yallerstone by water. He must arrive at night so’s he can hide up the boats if I ain’t all ready with the keelboat. When he

takes to the water Long Simons will bring the mules back here.

"Baker will stay here and split the men into small bands and send them to their beaver grounds. Once I git the packs into a keelboat I'm off for Fort Pierre, where I'll turn 'em over to Etienne Prevost to take down to St. Louis.

"Lander will go with Prevost, an' I shall come back here. I've made a square deal for the packs an' I'm going to take the profit. Now, Lander, pick a good horse while I have a talk with Black Arrow."

Half an hour later Bridger and Lander, escorted by a band of Crows, started for the Missouri. Bridger allowed himself twelve days for making the Big Horn. Traversing South Path they struck the Sweetwater but followed it only for a short distance before striking off for Wind River, an upper reach of the Big Horn above the mouth of the Popo-agie.

They were now in the Crow country and did not have much fear of being molested. Following down the Big Horn Valley they saw no Indians except those of their party until within one day's journey of the Yellowstone, when they came upon four hundred lodges of Crows.

Black Arrow insisted they tarry and have a feast. He was very keen for his tribesmen to witness Medicine Knife's dexterity. But Bridger did not dare to pause for fear of arriving at Fort Union after Berger had brought news of the fight and packs to Kenneth McKenzie.

Some of the leading men showed a disposition to prevent Bridger from proceeding, and began to act ugly. But Black Arrow was a man of influence, and when his men had displayed their wealth of Blackfeet scalps and told how many horses and scalps were to arrive, the white men were allowed to go on.

Bridger had expected Black Arrow to keep with him to the mouth of the Yellowstone, but the chief could not resist the temptation to cross to the village and participate in the great victory dance. In return for many trade goods to be delivered later the chief promised that none of his people would interfere with Papa Clair and his beaver packs.

Bridger nearly exhausted his companions in the short dash for the Yellowstone. He feared lest the Crows attempt some mischief, not violence but the theft of their weapons or horses. However, nothing occurred to disturb them, and

except for their haste Lander would have enjoyed the trip immensely.

The valley teemed with game and the traveling was easy. Reaching the confluence of the Big Horn and Yellowstone, Bridger chose the south, or right, bank, and without any unusual incidents pressed on until he had crossed the Rosebud and Tongue, when he passed to the north side of the river.

"What would happen if the Fort Union outfit learned we had the H. B. packs?" asked Lander on the last day of their trip.

Bridger chuckled grimly and replied:

"We wouldn't have 'em long if Kenneth McKenzie could help it. An' he's the king up here. He'd never let forty packs of prime beaver slip through his hands like that. He'd buy 'em, or take 'em.

"He'd show a paper from Ferguson, naming him agent for the H. B. He'd show a paper saying as how he had bought all title to 'em, with Ferguson signing it as the H. B.'s representative. If we held out he'd charge us with stealing 'em an' lock us up until the beaver was under lock an' key, or on the way down-river.

"If we went into court in St. Louis an' proved

our claim the A. F. C. would pay the price, minus the H. B.'s ten per cent. The A. F. C. has more power up here with the Injuns than the government has. So we must git the keelboat an' load it an' be off down-river the minute the packs come along.

"Don't you open your meat-trap while at the fort. Keep shet. Above all things don't start a row with Phinny. Warm up to him an' tell how glad you be he escaped.

"Don't wander away from the fort where old Deschamps can git a crack at you. I'll do all the talking, an' I won't seem to be in a hurry or look fussed up any. Kenneth McKenzie is a mighty hard man to fool."

By late afternoon they made the mouth of the Yellowstone. The channel was narrow and the water was low and they had no trouble in swimming their horses across to the north side of the Missouri. As they rode up the bank and came in sight of the solid pretentious structure of Fort Union, more persistently and intimately connected with the fur trade than any other post, Bridger whimsically remarked:

"You're almost eighteen hundred channel miles from the little lady in St. Louis, an' whether you

see her soon or go back to the mountains depends on how strong your medicine works for you while we're up there."

He pointed to the fort as he spoke. And even to Lander, fresh from St. Louis, the fort seemed to reflect the indomitable will and iron power of the mighty American Fur Company, against which all opposition was waged and which was to destroy or absorb all opponents.

The stockade measured more than two hundred feet on a side, with the bastions at the southwest and northeast corners. These bastions were houses thirty feet in height, built of stone with the lower story pierced for cannon, and with a balcony around the upper story for the purpose of observation. The two travelers saw men on the northeast balcony, presumably watching them, for one hastily disappeared as if to announce their coming.

Bridger gravely watched the lone man on the balcony for a few moments; then with a shrug of the shoulders he assumed his careless, good-natured and devil-may-care expression and rode for the single gate. An *engagé* was on the point of closing this, but waited until they had entered.

In the middle of the huge square stood a sev-

enty-foot flagstaff, and beside it were two cannon trained to cover the entrance. Surrounding the staff were the leather tents of the half-breed employees. At the rear of the square and facing the entrance stood the two-story house of Kenneth McKenzie, first king of the Missouri and the greatest bourgeois the A. F. C. ever had.

The house, like the other buildings inside the enclosure, was built of cottonwood. It boasted glass windows. Lander blinked in surprise. He had heard much about Fort Union in St. Louis, but was never able to draw an accurate line between fact and fiction. The powder-magazine, built of cut stone and having a capacity—as Bridger afterward informed him—of fifty thousand pounds, also increased his respect for his former employer.

There were well-equipped shops for the smith and carpenter and other workmen. There was an atmosphere of stability about the place. No wonder the Indians were slow to shift their allegiance to the flimsy post erected by the opposition, who in the river *argot* were known as one-winter-house traders.

"I'm Jim Bridger. I want to see Mr. McKenzie," Bridger told the *engagé*.

"He is sitting down to supper, Mr. Bridger. Places have been laid for you," said the *engagé*. He called a breed to take care of the horses and led the way inside the fort.

Here again the travelers found all the conveniences they would expect in the average inn back in civilization. As they were leaving the wash-room the man joined them with two black coats, and apologetically informed:

"Mr. McKenzie's rule that every one shall wear a coat at the table, Mr. Bridger. I haven't any doubt but what he would let the rule go hang in your case, but if you don't mind slipping this on——"

"We'll be glad to wear 'em," cheerfully interrupted Bridger.

They were then conducted to the long room where McKenzie and his staff had their meals. McKenzie left the head of the table and greeted Bridger warmly. He spared a nod for Lander, but retaining Bridger's hand exclaimed:

"If I'd had any notion it was you, Mr. Bridger, I should have rode to the river to meet you. Sit here at my right. Let the young man find a place among the clerks," and he pointed to the foot of the table.

Here was a greater caste distinction than Lander would have experienced in any household in St. Louis. The men were seated according to the rank of their occupation, and Susette's lover found himself decidedly below the salt and in the company of several harum-scarum youngsters going through their probation.

McKenzie was dressed in the St. Louis mode, and there was nothing in his carefully groomed and well-garbed appearance that could suggest the eighteen hundred miles between him and a civilized table. It would be several years before there would be even a rough settlement of whites above Independence.

What made an instant appeal to Lander and caused him to forget he was treated as being at par with the least of the staff was sight of the food. There were platters heaped high with tender, fat buffalo-meat. There were dishes of game birds and plenty of fresh butter, cream and milk.

However, and this was the only suggestion of stinting, there were only two biscuits at a plate. For although Fort Union might for a time run its own distillery in defiance of the law its bread ration remained something of a problem. To add

the final glamour to the feast was the snow-white cloth covering the table and the two colored men in white jackets serving as waiters.

From the low chatter of his immediate neighbors Lander learned more details of how McKenzie played the dictator on the Upper Missouri. Being fond of lingering over his wine he went to bed late. It was late when he arose, and, worst of all, no one could have breakfast until he was up and ready to be served. So the morning meal was seldom eaten earlier than nine o'clock.

From the clerks' babbling Lander deduced that Phinny had never mentioned him at the fort. He was glad of this. He casually spoke of seeing Phinny at the rendezvous and was elated and much surprised to be informed that his old enemy had not yet returned from Green River. To get there ahead of Phinny impressed him as being the best of luck.

He talked shop with the young men and learned that the early fall was the time for the jerked meat and tallow trade, the Indians taking hardly anything but liquor for this trade.

"But wait till old Berger fixes things with the Blackfeet," said one clerk. "Chief Good-Woman used to know him on the Saskatchewan and Ber-

ger's up there now, somewheres on the Marias. Berger's to be paid eight hundred dollars a year if he gets the Blackfeet to consent to our building a trading post on the Marias.

"You were lucky to get here without being robbed. A canoe band of Assiniboins, worst of that tribe and greatest thieves ever lived, started for the Crow county to steal horses. Don't see how you missed them."

But Lander was now all ears for the upper end of the table. McKenzie was saying:

"Mr. Bridger, here at Union alone last winter we made four hundred and sixty packs of robes, and other peltries in proportion. Our outposts sent in thirty-five hundred pounds of powdered buffalo-meat and three thousand pounds of dried. Our run of fox was remarkable. Lamont and his men alone brought us forty-two hundred buffalo-robes from up-river."

Bridger kept on eating and nodded in approval. At last he took time to say:

"Fine if any one goes in for robes. I never bother with 'em. I sold your young man quite a few packs. Took his order on St. Louis for 'em. Don't see him here."

McKenzie looked surprised and asked to see

the order. Bridger produced it and the nabob of the river read it carefully; then gravely informed:

"Perfectly correct, Mr. Bridger. I gave him authority to draw orders on St. Louis in case a man isn't coming here. Had he known you were coming to Fort Union he would have left the order for me to draw.

"I'm glad to have you turn the robes in to us. We deal in a big way. I'll get ten thousand robes from the Blackfeet next season.

"When I sent A. J. Tulloch to the Crows I told him to get them into the habit of trading—to trade them for anything they had. He went to the Yellowstone and some of his men were killed by a war-party of Blackfeet while they were chopping wood.

"He stuck and traded the Crows. His first returns made our men here laugh until they were sick. Hardly anything but elk and deer horns. Yet his trade on the whole was profitable because the A. F. C. can handle anything. That's why the Indians like us; we'll trade for anything they've got."

"Phinny isn't here."

"You must have passed him. Probably he was

resting at the Crow village and arranging for the winter trade. I'm glad to get the robes. Any time you have any we'll take them."

"I don't care to bother with 'em," Bridger carelessly assured. "All I'm after is beaver."

"We do quite a bit with beaver, and we shall do more. My man, Jacob Berger, is up visiting the Piegans. They're the best beaver-hunters among the Blackfeet, and as the opposition hasn't taken all the beaver above Milk River I'm expecting rather good returns from there."

"When does Berger git back?"

"Any time now."

"You'll be the first to git into their good feelings," said Bridger with a genial smile. "By the way, do you happen to have a keelboat in your *chantier* (navy yard)? I'd like to buy it if you have. I'll give a St. Louis order for it. It'll help cancel my order on you."

"Our *chantier* is twenty-five miles up-river, you know," slowly replied McKenzie, trying to imagine why Bridger, arriving without packs, should want a keelboat.

"I don't know just what we have there, or what condition it may be in. I might be willing to sell one. Of course we have use for all our

boats, but I'd like to oblige you, as you'll some time be working for the A. F. C. Yes, Mr. Bridger, I'd go out of my way to oblige you."

"Mighty handsome of you," declared Bridger, spearing a half-pound piece of meat. "I've got one down at Fort Pierre. Seeing as how I must go down-river I thought I'd take it there to be loaded with any packs we may be sending across-country. We usually pack 'em into St. Louis on our mules. Etienne Prevost is there at Pierre waiting for me.

"Of course he can make bull-boats if it comes to a pinch. An' then again we mayn't need another boat. But I'd like to feel sure. Can use it anyway."

"Why not come in with us?" bluntly asked McKenzie.

"Mebbe I will. I'm hitched up pretty tight just now, but with no settled posts to hold us together I may be free before next season. Mighty nice place you got here."

"I pride myself on it, sir. We do not chase the Indians. They must bring their hunt to us. They fight among themselves but they never bother us. Big war-parties are always coming here. Sometimes they meet and fight outside.

Sometimes they send word for us to keep in the fort so we won't be hurt.

"Old Gauche, the most feared and best obeyed chief of the Assiniboinis for forty years, stopped here yesterday on his way from down-river where he went to put a fight on the Aricaras. His medicine must have lied to him as he was soundly whipped. He's had enough fighting for a while and promised to bring me in two hundred robes.

"Rather easy way to get trade, eh? Very comfortable quarters. Annual steamer bringing supplies and those little things it's hard to get when living off a mule's back."

And he illustrated his meaning by tapping the bottle of wine that stood between them. Then reflectively:

"If you care to ride up to the *chantier* and see what we have for a boat I think we could arrange it."

"Mebbe I will to-morrow or next day," said Bridger.

"There are three there, I believe. Take any one."

"That's very kind of you."

CHAPTER XI

THE DESCHAMPS CLAN

AFTER supper Bridger walked about and inspected the fort and admired its arrangement, and visited McKenzie's home and expressed a proper amount of appreciation. McKenzie was determined to overwhelm him with the comforts and resources of the place, and all the time Bridger was burning with impatience to be off up-river to the *chantier*. If one of the boats was what he wanted he intended to get it down to the mouth of the Yellowstone and a few miles up that stream, and hide it until Papa Clair came along with the packs.

To get the rich prize out of the country he knew the loading and start must be worked without a hitch. Not only might Phinny arrive at any moment, having learned the truth of the beaver packs from the Crows, but Berger was hourly expected, and he would be sure to know. But

there was no suggestion of impatience or worry in Bridger's genial bearing.

McKenzie excused himself to attend to some routine matter and Bridger lounged up to Lander and without looking at him muttered:

"Sound the clerks about the boats at the *chantier*—number and condition. He says there are three there. We can have our pick. At first I thought he was going to refuse—suddenly gave in—signs look bad. Wait for me if you have to keep awake all night. I've got to set up with him and a bottle."

Until deep into the night Bridger listened to McKenzie's invitations to join the A. F. C. and his boastings of the company's remarkable success. If ever a man was licensed to feel proud from a trader's view-point of his success in the fur trade, it was Kenneth McKenzie.

How far he would have gone without the backing of the all-powerful company is another question. He was preeminently a trading-post man. It is doubtful if he could have plunged into the heart of an unknown country and attained the success that Bridger repeatedly scored.

Of the two men Bridger's life and efforts have been of vastly more value to posterity. McKenzie

was a superlative trader. Bridger was an excellent trader, a great explorer and a born topographer. As a hunter, trapper and guide he had few equals. In the last capacity Fate was drilling him for a most important task with Johnston's army in '57 and the Indian campaign of '65-'66.

McKenzie built exclusively for the advancement of the American Fur Company. Bridger built for the mighty hosts of humanity about to break loose across the plains and through the Rockies.

The mountain man listened gravely, never once mentioning the keelboat. McKenzie further to influence him quoted at length from his records of the huge number of fox, white hare, badger, white wolf, swanskins and dressed cowskins, in addition to the staple beaver and robes, the post handled every year.

"Mr. Bridger," he solemnly declared as he finished his display of records. "I'll promise you that you shall be made the head of a new department—bourgeois of the Rocky Mountain outfit of the A. F. C. with headquarters on Green River—at a salary of five thousand a year and a suitable percentage of the profits. There, sir! That is a proposition that I couldn't make with head-

quarters' consent to any other man in the mountains."

"It's a good offer," mused Bridger, "providing the percentage is all right. Not that there ain't a dozen men who can handle the work just as well as me. As I've said it all depends on the percentage, when you come to figuring its real value. Beaver won't always last. Big fortunes is to be made in it now, and I know beaver. But I'm much obliged for the offer. I'll chew it over on my way down-river."

"Think about it to-night," urged McKenzie. "And remember I never lie when I want a man—I tell him the blunt truth."

"Of course—makes a feller mad to find out some one has been lying to him. No sense in it. Now I'll turn in."

He proceeded to the room set apart for them and found Lander fully dressed and sound asleep. It was obvious he had tried to keep awake to make his report. Bridger shook him out of his slumber and softly asked:

"What do the clerks say about the boats at the *chantier*?"

Lander blinked owlshly at the door and surprised his friend by stealing to it and glancing

out into the hall. Stumbling back to Bridger he whispered:

"It's derved queer. Overheard it by chance when two of the clerks got to cussing their luck. When McKenzie left you it was to tell the clerks to take men and ride up to the *chantier* and bring down two keelboats and leave them on the north bank of the river, five miles above here. They started at once.

"From another clerk I found out there were three boats there just as he said, but one's so smashed up it's beyond repair. It's the smashed-up one we'll find."

"Which is darned poor listening," growled Bridger. "We must start early in the morning. He told me to take my pick of the boats up there. I'll do it! An' he said he never lied to a man when he wanted him.

"One thing's sartain; if we don't git a keelboat we'll trust to luck with the bull-boats. If we have to do that I'll be mighty sorry we didn't make for the Platte an' its shallow water. But I did want to go this way so's I could turn the packs over to Prevost an' git back to the mountains. Mebbe our medicine will work for us. Who knows?"

Only the horse-herders were astir when Brid-

ger aroused Lander from his unfinished slumbers. Lander sleepily repaired to the square and found his horse saddled and waiting. Bridger whistled and his own animal was brought from the shed.

"We'll start at once and eat a bite as we ride," said Bridger, swinging into the saddle. "I've raided the cook and have a saddle-bag filled with provender. Don't try to talk until we get clear of the fort." And he glanced up at the bastion as if expecting to behold McKenzie on the balcony.

The river bank was shrouded in the early morning mists and at a distance of a few hundred yards the fort became half-lost to view, the stockade entirely blotted out.

"McKenzie thinks there is some game being played," tersely broke out Bridger. "He wants to be mighty nice for he wants to git me into the A. F. C. But the keelboat sticks in his crop. He ain't made up his mind just what he'll do.

"To git time to think he sends men on the sly to fetch away any boat that'll hold water an' leave the bu'sted one. This makes it safe for him to tell me I can have my pick of boats up there.

"I'll come back with a talk that the boat ain't no good. He'll be surprised an' talk to the clerk. 'All of this will take time. An' it'll give him

room to do some thinking. He ain't satisfied about me coming here.

"When we git back from the *chantier* it's most likely he'll take a whirl at asking you questions. You won't know nothing, of course. Our danger is that Phinny or Jake Berger will come along before we quit wasting time—or worse still, that Papa Clair may come down the Yellowstone in his bull-boats an' be seen by some of the *engagés*. Lordy, that would be a mess!"

"Phinny may be quitting the Crow village just as Papa Clair comes along," suggested Lander.

"If you was a Injun you'd stick pine splinters into a prisoner an' light 'em before burning him at the stake," grinned Bridger. "Now keep shet while I look at the trail."

The sun was burning away the mists, and the trail they were following was broad and ancient. From immemorial times the buffalo had followed it; the Indians had followed it. It offered no information to Lander—no more than would a pavement of rock. To Bridger it babbled with many voices. The best plainsmen of his day said never an Indian nor a single horse could cross his path without his detecting the fact and determining how old was the bisecting trail.

The trail was hard packed by countless mocasins and hoofs, yet Bridger dismounted and dropped on his knees and became deeply interested in searching the brown earth. On the outskirts of the path the signs of recent travel were fresher. For twenty minutes the mountain man worked from the center of the trail to the edge and then back again, and as his investigation advanced Lander noted he confined all his attention to the north side.

Finally he rose and mounted his horse and announced:

"According to the number of horses some three hundred warriors are in Gauche's party."

"McKenzie said he had passed this way after being licked by the Aricaras," reminded Lander, beginning to think the time was lost.

"I wasn't pawing round to find out if McKenzie was speaking the truth, or was a liar. A blind man could read that part of the story without gitting off his horse," ironically retorted Bridger.

"What McKenzie didn't say, an' probably didn't know, was that Gauche, or Left Hand as some call him, has got a sick man an' a travois. The band was moving very slow at this point. We'll have to dodge their camp within the next

few miles. He might want us to stay an' visit him.

"The trail is twenty-four hours old, but one man on a lame horse has come along here within the last hour. He stops every little way. He's either studying the 'Assiniboin trail, or waiting for us. 'All of which means we must ride with our eyes open."

Two miles were passed without any attempt at conversation. Bridger had kept his gaze focused on the winding road. Suddenly he exclaimed under his breath and dismounted and dropped on his hands and knees. He crawled slowly from the trail for a distance of fifty feet. When he returned his face was grave.

"Eight men on foot swung into the trail where your nag stands. They stood an' talked with the man on horseback; then the nine of them quit the trail an' struck into the bush. The men on foot wasn't Assiniboins. Each had a gun as you can tell by the faint marks where they rested the butts while chinning the mounted man. They toe in an' their moccasins are heavier an' stronger than them worn by the 'Assiniboins, showing they go much afoot. They must be breeds that hang round the fort.

"They've l'arned that Gauche is in camp with a sick man. Sick man must be a big medicine man or a chief, else Gauche wouldn't hold up his march for him. The breeds probably figger to sneak in after dark an' run off the horses. The camp must be within a mile or two an' the breeds are drawing well back from the trail to wait until night."

They rode for a bit when Bridger led off from the trail and explained:

"I want to give Gauche a wide berth. He's sure to be ugly as a bear with a sore head along of the whipping he got down-river. We'll beat back a few miles an' then strike straight for the *chantier*."

The traveling became much slower after they left the trail. Bridger watched for signs of men afoot but found none, and this convinced him that his deductions were correct. The nine men had simply withdrawn to one side to wait until dark. With the quickness of the forest bred he slipped from his horse and leveled his rifle across the saddle before Lander could imagine what was the matter.

Then among the bushes he made out the figure of an Indian woman. Her hair was gray and as

she stared at them she tore at it. With a little laugh at his alarm Bridger swung back into the saddle and the woman eagerly advanced and began talking shrilly and rapidly.

"She's speaking Assiniboin," said Bridger as he watched and listened. "I git it all right."

The woman ceased talking and made signs. Bridger nodded and said:

"One of your young men is hurt?"

"Hurt very bad," she replied. "Come and make him medicine."

Bridger possessed the mountain man's knowledge of emergency surgery. Also was he imbued with the superstitions of the Indians. He believed in his medicine. His kind heart urged him to follow the woman. His commercial instinct warned that he had no time to lose if he would visit the *chantier* and return to the fort before Phinny or Jake Berger arrived to inform McKenzie about the forty packs. He explained the situation to Lander.

The woman was laboring under great mental distress. There was none of the Indian stoicism Lander had heard so much about. Lander's sympathy was aroused.

Bridger asked how far she had come. She held

the thumb and forefinger of her hands together as if holding a thread, then pulled them apart a few inches, then raised a hand with finger erect and moved it from side to side and forward.

"Says we can git there in a short time an' in a few steps," translated Bridger. "Reckon we'd best go with her. My medicine feels strong this morning. Some worthless breed; but if he's hurt, he's hurt."

The woman seemed overwhelmed with joy as he motioned her to lead the way. She ran ahead and repeatedly looked back to make sure they were following her. In this fashion she led them nearly a mile through the bush-grown area.

Bridger finally reined in and beckoned her to come back. She shook her head and pointed, and gestured for him to come on, and to convince him he had all but arrived she raised her voice and called out.

Bridger set his horse in motion, his eyes on the woman, and although his quick ear caught the rustling of bushes he was surrounded and his gun snatched from his hand before he could turn his head. A side glance revealed Lander likewise disarmed and dazed by the quickness of it all.

The woman ahead danced and flung her arms

above her head and cackled hideously. Directly ahead of Bridger stood old Deschamps, and his gun covered Bridger's chest. To Lander, Bridger called out:

"Take it easy. Don't show any fight—yet. That old hag led us into a' ambush. These are thieving breeds. What the devil's the matter with that medicine of mine!" Then to Deschamps: "Why do you hold me up like this?"

"We want to have a talk with you," Deschamps explained in Assiniboin.

"Talk Crow or English, you thieving devil," commanded Bridger.

"Get down and come into our hut," ordered Deschamps, backing away a few steps and speaking in the Crow tongue.

"That skunk Phinny is in there waiting for us?"

"No. I left him at the Crow village on the Yellowstone. He is to marry my girl—make her his wife like white men marry white women. But I do not trust him yet," chuckled Deschamps.

'As he finished a young woman, comely of feature and graceful of form, came bounding through the growth and stared wide-eyed at the *white* men. Lander caught her fancy for a mo-

ment, and she drew close to him and peered up into his hot face.

She showed her white blood in her complexion and light-gray eyes, but there was frank animalism in her steady stare that made Lander nervous and caused her to laugh scornfully. Darting to Bridger she placed a small foot in the stirrup and lifted herself erect and maintained her balance by seizing his shaggy brown hair.

Bridger's gaze was as cold as hers was volcanic. Her insolence changed to something akin to admiration and she tugged his hair playfully.

"Phinny's squaw!" exclaimed Bridger, seizing her wrists and forcing her to release her grasp.

She fought like a fury, trying to reach his face with her fingers. With a grunt of disgust he picked her up in his arms and tossed her over his horse's head and into her father's arms.

With a scream of rage she pulled a dirk and came at him, her teeth bare, her eyes blazing. He made no move until her arm went back for the blow; then he caught her wrist and gave it a wrench that brought a howl of pain to her red lips. Turning toward Deschamps he sternly ordered: "Take this hell-cat away."

Deschamps shrugged his shoulders, showing

no inclination to interfere. But another of the family, Francois, the oldest son, dropped his gun and pinioned the girl's hands to her sides and carried her into the bush. When he came back the girl did not attempt to follow him.

"Good lord! What a woman!" gasped Lander. He stood in greater fear of the pretty vixen than he did of the entire Deschamps gang.

"If Phinny marries her he will be paying the price for all his deviltry."

"Get down," ordered Deschamps.

There was an ominous steadying of guns and Bridger quietly slid from the saddle and motioned for Lander to do likewise.

"You and your gang plan to steal Gauche's horses while he camps to cure a sick man," Bridger accused.

Deschamps was startled. The white man's medicine was very wise to read his plans. His villainous old face hardened. When the white man showed he knew so much he dug his own grave. After he had answered certain important questions he and his young friend would disappear. Bridger swung his bold gaze over the circle of sullen faces and remarked:

"My medicine is whispering to me that your

friend Francois will be killed very soon—I see Jack Rem and his three sons. They hunt with the Deschamps now but my medicine says the time is just ahead when the two families will fight and kill each other off. Wait—my medicine is whispering.”

He paused and tilted his head and smiled grimly—then announced:

“My medicine says Baptiste Gardepied is coming after you with a big war-party of Blackfeet. Better git yourself killed before he gets you.”

“You lie!” hissed Deschamps. “Gardepied knows I will kill him and has left the country.”

“He is with the Blackfeet and has turned them against you. He almost caught you when you betrayed my young man into the hands of the Blackfeet. He set the young man free. He will kill you.”

“No more, or I will kill you,” yelled Deschamps, now beside himself with rage.

Francois feared his father’s anger would break up their plans, so he now assumed command and gave an order.

The men closed in about Bridger and Lander and poked them with their guns and drove them toward the old woman who had acted as the

decoy. She fell back as the prisoners were made to advance, and within a few minutes halted before a long log cabin roofed with bark.

The whites were pushed through the low door, the breeds following and remaining between them and the only exit. On each side of the room was a small opening, high up and too small for a man to escape through. These answered for windows and admitted light.

In the middle of the room was a short section of a cottonwood log, standing on end to serve as a stool. Bridger appropriated the stool and Lander dropped on the hard-packed earth at his side and clasped his hands over his knees—the knife in his right boot being ready for his hand.

Deschamps stepped ahead of his gang to act as inquisitor, but before he could begin, his daughter squirmed her way through the group and darted like a fury toward Bridger and raised a long-barreled pistol. The intrusion was so quickly completed that not a man moved, and as she stood crouching before her victim, the pistol leveled, the occupants of the room became paralyzed and glared blankly and waited for the tragedy to arouse them to action.

Bridger, on the stool, remained calm of coun-

tenance, his gray eyes meeting and holding the eyes of the woman. Her bosom rose and fell with the lust to kill. Still the gray eyes held her gaze captive, and as she stared she found herself discovering strange depths in the dilated pupils.

No one about the door dared move, for fear of precipitating the homicide. Lander was frozen with horror of the situation and looked straight ahead, waiting for the pistol to speak. For a slow count of ten the tableau endured, then with a shriek the girl dropped the pistol, threw up both hands and staggered blindly for the door.

The men gave way and in silence watched her depart. The white man's medicine was very powerful when it could tame a wildcat like the Deschamps girl. Bridger picked up the pistol and examined it and then laid it between his feet.

Deschamps recovered first from the general stupor. He ordered: "Give up that pistol."

"The young woman gave it to me. I will keep it here," quietly replied Bridger.

"Give it up or I fire!" commanded Deschamps aiming his gun.

"That would spoil your plans. You brought us here for something," reminded Bridger, placing a moccasin on the pistol.

"Let him keep it. We have many guns," spoke up Francois.

"But we will shoot if his hand touches it again," added Jack Rem.

Deschamps changed his attitude and called out for the old woman to see that the girl did not enter the cabin again. Then turning to Bridger he asked: "Where are the packs of beaver you took from the Blackfoot medicine-lodge?"

"Oh, ho! So that was the cat in the bag, eh?" chuckled Bridger. "Did Phinny think I was carrying 'em with me? You might look in my saddle-bags; or perhaps my young man has 'em in his belt."

"Phinny doesn't know about them," sullenly replied Deschamps. He added:

"I was told about them at the Crow village a day's march below the mouth of the Yellowstone. Black Arrow told his warriors to say nothing about the packs to us, but one man was my friend and told me. Phinny does not understand the Crow tongue. He knows nothing. Ferguson may find out about it, but he had not when I left the village."

Bridger eyed him in admiration. Deschamps' reputation for bloodthirsty devilry was known

to most mountain men, but few would have credited him with scheming to steal forty thousand dollars' worth of beaver, unless he found the packs cached and unguarded. His larceny was especially daring since it involved the deception of an A. F. C. man.

"Pretty smart for a' Injun. What did the Crows tell you?" asked Bridger.

"How you and the boy got the packs. You two came through the valley alone. Your coming to Union tells me the packs will come down the Yellowstone. You are not such a fool as to have them brought to the fort where Phinny and McKenzie would see them. Phinny hired Ferguson away from you. He will handle the Crow trade for the A. F. C. this winter."

"Phinny will be coming to the fort soon," mused Bridger.

"He started as soon as he found I had gone," growled Deschamps. "But he better be careful. He wanted my girl for his squaw. Now he doesn't seem to want her so much. But he can't make a fool of her. She's got white blood in her. He'll take her, or I'll cut his throat."

"She'll cut his throat if he takes her," grunted the younger Deschamps with a hideous leer.

"I don't like him. I'm going to kill him anyway," growled Francois.

"Keep still!" snarled Deschamps. To Bridger:

"I'm waiting to know when the packs will come through and how. Tell me and you won't be hurt."

"They're to come by pack mules. How do I know when a string of mules will git into Fort Union, you fool? Phinny may hold them up for all I know. Perhaps he has them now."

Deschamps gnawed his lips and eyed Bridger evilly. Jack Rem spoke up and declared:

"Your white medicine is strong, you say. It better tell you where the packs are. My woman was at the fort when you asked about a keelboat. You want it for the packs."

Deschamps stamped his feet and cried:

"Good for you, Jack Rem. Your woman shall have much red cloth. She has sharp ears.

"So you'd fool the old fox, would you, Bridger? Keep him covered, boys. I'll give him until I fill my pipe to tell when the packs will come down the Yellowstone."

Bridger bowed his head and pondered deeply. There were nine of them, all armed and not a bit averse to murder. His and Lander's rifles stood

in the corner. He had a short skinning-knife in his belt and Lander had his long blade in his boot. His moccasin rested on the long-barrel pistol. One life—if it could be discharged. But should either he or Lander make a move both would be riddled. Were it in his power to turn over the packs on the spot he knew the gang would not permit him and Lander to leave the hut alive could they help it. His only hope was to play for time until a moment came when the gang was off guard.

"Deschamps," he earnestly insisted, "I do not know when the packs will come. Mebbe in three days. Mebbe not for twice as long. Mebbe not at all. I came ahead and traveled fast. That is the best I can tell you."

"You'll do better than that or never leave this hut," coolly retorted Deschamps, still rolling the tobacco between his palms. "I've killed better men than you. Tell the truth and you'll be kept here till we get the packs. Then you'll be free to go."

Bridger smothered a smile, still fighting for a little chance to turn up on which he could pivot an offensive. Lifting his head he gravely said:

"My medicine knows everything. If it will tell me I will tell you. I do not want to die. I can

get more beaver. A life lost stays lost. I will talk to my medicine."

Deschamps brightened and nodded for him to proceed.

Bridger warned: "Let no one move or speak, or I shall learn nothing." Then very deliberately to show he intended no tricks he gently pushed the pistol to one side, bent between his knees and rested a finger on the earthen floor near Lander. He tapped on the floor in front of the log which served him for a stool, as if to attract his medicine, and succeeded in putting Lander on the *qui vive*. Then he tilted his head as if listening, and was able to keep an eye on the gang.

The breeds stood breathless and waited. None of them had any doubts as to the virtue and intelligence of Bridger's medicine. It was celebrated for efficacy throughout the mountains. Nor was there one who failed to understand how whimsical a man's medicine can be at times, and must be catered to and indulged and have feasts made for it.

Bridger's eyes widened and he began working his finger in the dirt. Lander with a sidewise gaze saw letters forming in the dirt. With much business of listening to the mysterious voice and

taking care not to move his lips and give any alarm Bridger slowly completed his message. Lander read:

Fall flat when they fire then at em I shall thro
the log

Lander, staring blankly, patted his boot-leg to show he understood. Bridger rocked his head back and forth and began to groan; then he bowed forward, his hands working convulsively between his legs and against the log. He was like a medicine man having convulsions.

"My medicine is here!" he gasped, his eyes protruding wildly, his hands resting on the sides of the log, his legs straddling gradually apart.

"What does it say?" whispered Deschamps.

"This!" roared Bridger, surging forward while his hands fetched the log between his legs and with a violent toss hurled it into the group. And as he made the cast he threw himself flat, pulled Lander with him, and reached for the pistol.

As the two went down four of the men fired—their lead plumping into the rear wall. Deschamps was scrambling for his rifle and four of the men were writhing on the floor—knocked over by the weight of the heavy missile.

"At 'em!" yelled Bridger, coming to his feet and rushing toward the door.

He snapped the pistol at Deschamps and it failed to explode. He hurled it and struck a man in the chest. Lander was at his side, his knife drawn. One of Rem's sons-in-law jumped to get the prisoners' rifles, but Lander threw his knife and pinned the man's arm to the wall.

The men knocked out by the log began crawling to their feet. Deschamps shrieked to the others to use their knives. Before they could draw their knives, however, Bridger was among them, trying to bore a hole to the door.

He instantly became the hub of a revolving wheel of fiercely fighting men. He caught old Deschamps by the scruff of the neck and flung him about as a shield while his free hand delivered smashing blows. The younger Deschamps boy tried to dirk the mountain man but drove his steel into his father's arm and was rewarded with a string of horrible curses.

Bridger looked for Lander to help him and was dismayed to see him on the floor with blood flowing from a cut on the head. A war-ax lay at his side with blood on the handle. The exulting face of the Deschamps girl in the doorway and the

direction of her gaze told him it was she who had hurled the ax, and only by chance had the handle instead of the blade struck the blow.

The sight of the young man maddened Bridger. Pivoting on his heel he swept Deschamps around in a circle, and maintained his balance with his outstretched right fist—two spokes in a terrible wheel. He felt Deschamps go limp and knew his senses had been battered out of him.

Four men were down and showed no inclination to rise. Three men still opposed him as the fellow pinned to the wall made no effort to release himself, and Deschamps was unconscious. Ceasing his gyrations he lifted Deschamps above his head and hurled him against Francois, and evil father and son went down together. Leaping over the prostrate bodies with two men after him armed with knives, he reached the man pinned against the wall, wrenched loose Lander's knife and wheeled and slashed one of his assailants across the face. Something fanned his cheek and a knife stuck and vibrated in a log. Again the girl at the door. Ignoring her and the chances of further attention on her part he drove the remaining combatant back and secured the two rifles.

Lander was now rolling his head and groaning.

Holding both guns in one hand, Bridger tossed the long knife at Lander's side and cried:

"There's your medicine. Wake up an' pick it up! We've licked 'em!"

Lander's fingers closed on the haft and he crawled to his feet, glared wildly about, then sensed the meaning of it all and lurched toward his friend mumbling:

"You've licked them you mean. Lord, what a fight you put up!"

"Reckon even Jim Baker would have to knuckle down a little to this scrimmage," Bridger proudly admitted as he swept his gaze over the prostrate forms.

"Them two bears he fit an' killed weren't full grown of course. But baby grizzlies are mighty bad poison. Now we'll quit this place. Have your knife ready an' look out for that hell-cat. Some of these in here may be playing 'possum. I'll back out an' keep 'em cooped up till you can find an' fetch the horses. Go ahead."

Lander leaped through the doorway and endeavored to cry a warning to his patron. Bridger followed and was instantly seized and hurled to the ground.

CHAPTER XII

MEDICINE FOR THE LANCE

FLAT on his back Bridger looked up into a circle of savage faces. Lander stood helpless between two warriors, a red hand over his mouth. The men holding Bridger down stepped back and permitted him to rise. Both his rifle and knife had been taken from him when he was first seized.

In addition to the circle about him there was another and a stronger line a few rods back. He made no move to escape, but when he observed the Deschamps and Rem breeds sneaking through the door and disappearing into the bush he called on his captors to stop them.

"Let the dogs go. We know where to find them when we are drunk and want to dance a mangy scalp," spoke up a deep voice.

Bridger twisted about and beheld a short, powerfully built Indian with much gray in his hair

advancing through the inner circle. Waiting until the man stood before him Bridger greeted:

"My friend Gauche comes after I have won my fight."

Lander caught the one word Gauche, and knew he was in the presence of perhaps the most cruel and crafty Indian the Northwest had produced in many years.

Gauche stared coldly at Bridger. He still smarted from the drubbing inflicted by the Aricaras. He knew Bridger was a mighty warrior, but he owed him no trade allegiance. There was a smoldering rage in his black heart which could be eased only by torture or ransom.

Bridger and his young man were not connected with Fort Union, and there was no A. F. C. reprisal to fear. But Bridger was a big man in the mountains, and at the head of a pioneer fur company. He was worth a fat ransom.

"Why don't you say something, Gauche? Your men hear fighting and seize me and my brother and let those mixed bloods go. They came to steal your horses. Why are hands placed on me? Don't you know it is bad business for you to treat a white man this way? Or do you want trouble with white men?"

Gauche smiled inscrutably, and replied:

"I have said it. The Deschamps hair is mangy. My medicine will not feed on such. When I want them I will send some of my squaws to cut off their heads. They have nothing I want.

"Now about yourself. What do I care for your words? Have the white men ever made Gauche, the Left-Handed, run? When he calls himself Wakontonga, the Great Medicine, does he go and hide? When on the war-path he is known as Mina-Yougha, the Knife-Holder, is he ever afraid?"

"Has not Death many times sent to him saying, 'He invites you,' and has not Gauche always answered with a laugh and returned to living out his time? Speak soft, white man; do not leave a trail of words that will make me angry."

"Squaw's talk," sneered Bridger. "Draw off all but a handful of your men and give me a knife or an ax, and you'll find the kind of a trail I will leave for you."

Gauche lifted his ax as if to strike with the flat of it, encountered Bridger's blazing eyes and knew if he struck he must kill. As that did not meet with his purpose he put the ax aside and briefly said:

"I open a new trade. I need you."

"Go on," said Bridger, now sensing what was coming.

"You live among white folks, many sleeps down the long river. You have big lodges filled with goods. You will go with me to my camp, where I shall make a big feast for my war-medicine. Then you will send a talking-paper down the river by the young man. You will send for a fire-canoe to come up here with many presents for the Assiniboins."

"Your medicine must be foolish to make you talk like this," sneered Bridger. "I am on my way to the place-of-building-boats. I am McKenzie's friend. He made me a big feast at the fort last night. We sat up till the moon grew tired, drinking from big bottles."

"McKenzie and his men are following after me. Now I have lived in his lodge and eaten his meat and drunk from his bottle. Let the Assiniboins watch their steps carefully, or they will step on a snake that bites and poisons."

Gauche concealed his concern at this bold speech. Of all things he must not incur the displeasure of McKenzie. It was from Fort Union *that* he obtained the all-necessary guns and pow-

der and ball and the dearly loved liquor. Adhering to his original purpose of holding the mountain man for a big ransom, he changed his bearing to one of friendliness. He said:

"There are bad men about here. If you are a friend of the Great Chief at the fort you are a friend of the Assiniboins. You shall go to the place-of-building-boats. Our camp is near there. We will go with you to see no bad breeds hurt you."

"Nine men tried to hurt me in the cabin. Those who have not crawled out are too sick to move. To some, perhaps, Death has sent word, 'Come, he invites you.' They were not cunning like Gauche. They went. I do not need your help, Gauche, but you will need mine. Therefore we will travel together."

Gauche was puzzled by these words and studied Bridger suspiciously.

"We will ride to the place-of-building-boats together like two brothers," he sullenly assented.

"Good. Give us our guns and bring our horses. My young man and I are in no hurry but you must ride fast or your sick man will die."

Gauche felt himself trembling. He stepped back and moved about to hide his sudden fear.

"Why speak of a sick man? Where is he?" he demanded.

"In your camp. You pitch your lodges to wait until he gets well or dies. Your medicine is weak. It let the Aricaras whip you. It can not make your friend well."

The chief prided himself on being a magician with the greatest of power. He had a nation of credulous believers and few skeptics. As fast as he found a skeptic he fed him poison. Having devoted so much of his time and thoughts to sorcery and magic, it was natural that he should be ensnared in his own black webs, and he began to wish he had never seen this strange white man, who mocked him before his warriors.

"The white man has a strong medicine?" he muttered.

"Very strong. My young man here has a very strong knife-medicine. Black Arrow of the Crows offered him many ponies for it. But my medicine takes his by the hand and leads it about as you would lead a child."

"Then he shall lead my friend back to strength. He is La Lance, one of my chiefs. There are crooked tongues that will say my magic *killed* him if he dies.

"There were cords through his bones and wolf-hairs under his skin and bird-claws in his flesh. With my medicine I took them all out and showed them to him. But there is an evil spirit in him my medicine can not reach. My warriors stand about the lodge to shoot it when it comes out, but my medicine can not drive it out."

Bridger turned and nodded lightly to Lander, rapidly explaining:

"Chief has a sick Injun on his hands. Afraid he's going to die an' that his reputation as a poisoner will make other bands in the tribe think he was murdered. That shows it ain't a cut or a gunshot." Then to Gauche:

"Bring our horses and guns, and lead the way. We are in no hurry. We will stop long enough to look at the sick man. I am full up to my neck with this talk."

The horses and weapons were brought up; and, equipped once more and mounted, the white men rode side by side with the Assiniboins in front and bringing up the rear. Lander anxiously murmured:

"But you can't cure the sick man."

"White medicine is stronger'n red any time," replied Bridger. "If it's something very simple

I'll use some doctor's stuff in my saddle-bag. I've toted it to the mountains an' back every trip. My medicine would work all right on anything, but I never bother it for something that don't 'mount to much. An' it ain't awful keen to work on an Injun, anyway. I've worked it on Crows, as they're friends of mine, but I always was afraid an Injun would make it grow weak. Jim Baker's got crazy idee's 'bout medicine—still, it's all right not to take chances.

"A feast of b'iled berries mayn't do it any good, but I reckon they wouldn't do it any harm. Jim won't take no chances when it comes to his medicine. I've know'd him to travel four hundred miles just to git something he allowed his medicine would relish. Between my medicine an' the doctor's stuff I'll pull the Lance through or kill him."

Gauche's camp consisted of some three hundred warriors. Bridger shrewdly surmised that the Aricaras must have had help from the Sioux tribes to defeat so big a band. When the chief and his prisoners rode into camp there rose a great commotion, and from the snatches of gibes hurled at them Bridger managed to patch out the truth.

Gauche had learned of Bridger's presence at the fort and had determined to capture him and hold him for a big ransom. In this way he would in part make up for the spoils he had planned to take from the Aricaras. The men in the camp on seeing the two whites boldly taunted them with being held for ransom, and Gauche heard it with stolid face and glittering eyes.

Bridger halted in the middle of the camp and said to Gauche:

"Tell your men we are here to cure a sick man of a devil, and that afterward we are to be free to go our way. Tell them that is the only ransom we will pay. If the man dies his friends will say you poisoned him. Then two, three bands will join together against you. Perhaps your own people will turn against you. If La Lance dies it will cost you your life."

"If he dies you will be the cause, and you will die," hissed Gauche. "But I will say what you wish."

And lifting his powerful voice for quiet he told his people how he had made a bargain with the white men. If they cured La Lance they were to go free. If they failed, his people could *kill them or hold them for ransom.*

This did not please the bulk of the warriors. They cared nothing for La Lance, who came from another band. He had not carried himself so conspicuously as to win their admiration during the Aricara campaign. He had not been wounded. Either his fear had made him sick, or old Gauche was slowly poisoning him to death. They rather approved of the latter fate. To keep secret from his captives the mutinous inclination of some of his men Gauche dismissed all but six of his companions and then led the way to a tent at one side of the camp.

As they rode toward this Bridger opened a saddle-bag and extracted a medicine-case and tucked it under his shirt. As they dismounted from their horses in front of the tent four warriors standing guard there discharged their guns at the ground and one ran about clubbing his gun as if striking at something.

Then one of the guards loudly and proudly called out that the approach of the great master had frightened the evil spirit from the sick man and that they had shot and clubbed it to death as it ran from under the tent. One said it was the size of a river-rat.

Gauche received the compliment in silence and

seemed a bit loath to enter the tent. Bridger crowded by him and stood looking down on La Lance, who had three years to live before being dissected and eaten by the Big Bellies. Bridger diagnosed his sickness as malarial fever and felt much relieved.

Gauche now entered and displayed some cords of rawhide, some strands of coarse hair, such as the Indians plucked from between the buffalo's horns for the making of horse-hobbles, and three withered bird-claws.

"These were taken from the sick man's body by my medicine," he modestly reminded.

Bridger gravely bowed his head and declared:

"Your magic is big. Your medicine is very strong, for it drove out a devil. But it was only a little devil and the big devil remains. My medicine let me see the little devil when it ran from under the tent. Will you try again, or shall I use my medicine?"

La Lance began groaning. His eyes were closed and he did not sense the presence of the three men. Gauche hastily decided:

"My white brother shall try his medicine."

Bridger fumbled at his medicine-case and bowed his head as if in deep thought. He tilted

his head as if listening to ghost voices; but in his sidelong glance Lander beheld a twinkle in the gray eyes and a twitching at the corners of the firm mouth that told of hidden laughter.

Staring intently at Gauche, the mountain man motioned for silence. Gauche and Lander stood rigid. Only the moaning of the sick man and the murmur of angry warriors outside the tent intruded on the silence. With an abruptness that caused the chief to step back nervously Bridger hissed:

"My medicine tells me the sick man is troubled by the Water Spirit. Your medicine is strong, but it can not drive out the Water Spirit. Wait—my medicine brings another talk to me."

He cocked his head and listened and nodded; then triumphantly announced:

"Now I have it. Send warriors along the river bank toward Fort Union. Before they come in sight of the fort they will find two keelboats tied to the bank. The boats probably will be hidden in the bull-berry bushes. They must look very sharp. They must untie one of these boats and take it up-river to the place-of-building-boats. There they will find a broken boat.

"The Water Spirit says there is big medicine in

the broken boat but that it can not work until the sick boat has the strong boat fastened to the sick boat, then will my medicine work and drive out the Water Spirit from the Lance."

Gauche never dreamed of doubting this diagnosis and cure. His savage mind fed on the things it had created. It appealed to him as being extremely logical that the Water Spirit should grieve over the wounded boat and should torment some Assiniboin warrior until an undamaged boat was brought to keep company with the broken one. He left the tent to send men after the hidden craft, and the moment the camp beheld him shouts were raised.

"What do they say?" asked Lander.

Bridger produced a bottle of fever medicine and forced several swallows down the sick man's throat.

"That will give him a jolt, I reckon," he grimly mused. "What are they saying? Oh, not much of anything. Some say the Lance is sick because he is a coward. Others say the tribe's medicine is against his being with Gauche's band and that the Aricaras would have been whipped if he hadn't been along. The most of 'em don't give a hang for the Lance— Ah."

"What?"

Bridger frowned.

"One of the head men is asking Gauche if we are to be let go without paying a big price. He says we do not belong to the fort; that the Assiniboins would be fools if they didn't make a profit out of us. Now Gauche is talking but I can not hear him well— Bufler 'n' beaver! Hear 'em now! That means he's made 'em mad—that he's told 'em we're to go without paying any ransom. He's the boss an' his word is law—let 'em howl all they want to. There's just one thing that'll make him change his mind an' treat us like dirt."

"If we fail to cure this man," said Lander.

"Not by a dern sight. If his warriors don't find that keelboat. Talk to your medicine, boy, an' git it to working. They just got to find that boat."

He lifted a finger and turned to the sick man. Gauche glided in, his dark face scowling.

"Some of my men talk like fools," he growled. "Some of them will go hunting their uncles among the spirits. They forget I am the Left Hand, that I am Mina-Yougha the Knife-Holder and Wakontonga the Great Medicine. It comes of taking them to the white man's fort."

"The man McKenzie thinks to make any trade by treating my warriors as if they were chiefs. They forget I can make black medicine."

"Do they go to find the boat?" asked Bridger anxiously.

"They go. My white brother's medicine must have eyes like the eagle to see so far. He shall give me the medicine that drives out the Water Spirit and I will not ask for gifts from the canoe-that-walks-on-the-water. When does the big spirit leave the Lance?"

Bridger glanced at the flushed face of the sufferer and recalled cases he had treated among his trappers. His answer must be a gamble at the best, as he did not know how long it would require for the men to find the boat and work it up to the *chantier*. But Gauche was waiting, his small eyes demanding an immediate answer.

"When your young men come back and say the boat is in its place the spirit will leave him," Bridger calmly assured.

"Wait here. I will see a tent is made ready for you," said the chief. This time he was gone but a few minutes. They followed him to a tent pitched within twoscore feet of the sick man's. Motioning them to enter, he left them.

Inside was a kettle of water and some dried buffalo-meat. Before the entrance was fuel and two crotched sticks on which to hang the kettle. Bridger measured out some medicine into a wooden dish and diluted it with water and placed it near the door. Then he lighted a fire and hung the kettle.

"Going to try and cook that stuff?" asked Lander in huge disgust, pointing to the dried meat.

"No, no. That's good just as it is," said Bridger, catching up a strip and working his strong, white teeth through it. "Doesn't smell very bad, either."

"Ugh! Then why the hot water?"

"That sick cuss has fever an' chills. I've got to bu'st it up during the night. I give him a mighty strong dose—full strength. 'Nough to make a horse sweat. Now I must git to him again in 'bout two hours. I need lots of hot water. See those devils scowl at us."

The last, as a band of warriors paraded by the tent at a respectful distance and lowered blackly at the white men.

"Never a Injun had more power over so many men in this valley as Gauche has had over his band," ruminated Bridger. "But the old cuss

has it right when he says he may lose his grip because of the men getting to the fort.

"The A. F. C. makes a heap of 'em when they bring in a good trade. They always start their liquor trade at dark an' keep it up all night. Old Gauche has a tin dipper which he never lets go of, an' he rushes in an' out an' gits beastly drunk an' keeps so. When he's drunk his authority slips a trifle. His men, being drunk, say an' do things they wouldn't dast do before him when sober, an' they ain't made to suffer. This has been going on ever since the A. F. C. got active up here a few years ago.

"Gauche's men are beginning to wonder if he's much better'n they be. He's always held 'em in check by his reputation as a medicine man, poisoner and worker in magic. But the first time he led his band to Fort Union an' stopped outside to vermilion an' dress up an' hear the cannon shot off in his honor he was losing a bit of his power.

"Three years ago there wasn't a man in his band that would 'a' dared to give him any lip. Now he's kept everlastingly at it to think up games where he can run off some Blackfeet horses an' lift some Sioux hair so's they'll stick to him as a big chief.

"His trip down-river give his standing an awful jolt. They blame his medicine for the licking. He thought to make 'em forgit by corraling us an' gittin' a big ransom, but the Lance blocks that game. If the Lance dies the Lance's band will blame him, an' say he poisoned the cuss. He's just got to cure the Lance or have trouble. With his own men gitting sassy he can't afford to let that happen."

"If the Lance gets well he'll probably hold us for ransom just the same," observed Lander.

"He'll have to be crowded awful hard before he'd do that. First place, he'd be afraid of my medicine. Second place, he knows he can't go only 'bout so far before McKenzie would have to call a halt. But if McKenzie l'arns 'bout the beaver packs he won't call a halt till he's got his paws on 'em. I'm going to git out of this camp to-morrer if I have to take Gauche up in front of me."

Lander worried down some of the tough meat while Bridger ate heartily. Groups of warriors kept passing the tent and eying it malevolently. Bridger ignored them but Lander shifted his knife from boot to belt and would have felt more at ease had Gauche been with them. The chief, however, had disappeared.

As the darkness settled over the camp Bridger commented on Gauche's absence and explained it by saying:

"He's gone off alone somewheres to make new medicine. No good comes of shifting your medicines the way he does. Git a good one and stick to it. It may git lame when it meets a stronger medicine; but if it averages up well that's all you can ask.

"Jim Baker swapped his medicine for a spotted Cheyenne pony once. Pony bu'sted a leg next day an' the Injun who'd took the medicine sneaked in an' stole Jim's rifle. Just plumb foolishness."

"But if he don't come back his men will get rough," said Lander.

"Sure to. But listen to me; no matter what they try, you keep calm an' act like you didn't know they was round. Time enough to make a fight when you see me letting out."

By degrees the camp quieted down and Lander believed they were to have a quiet night despite the chief's absence, when a long howl down by the river bank caused him to start nervously. They were sitting before their tent. As the outcry continued Bridger rose and entered the tent.

and called Lander after him. Then he fixed the flap in place.

"It's hot and stuffy," complained Lander, feeling about and locating a buffalo-robe and sitting down.

"Just remember my orders. Don't show fight till I give the word," quietly replied Bridger.

Now the noise by the river increased in volume. Bridger informed:

"Some of the bucks have fetched liquor from Fort Union."

The two sat and waited while the bedlam drew nearer. Lander was puzzled in following the course of the hideous chorus. It would sweep toward them, then lessen in intensity, only to pass to one side with renewed volume. Bridger lighted his pipe and explained:

"They're feasting from lodge to lodge, giving rum to each tent and asking the people to join 'em. They'll be here by 'n' by."

"And shall we wait?"

"Best thing to do. Fetch in some of the dry wood. I'll make a fire an' open the smoke-hole. Leave the flap back. We'll give 'em a chance to see."

All this was bewildering to Lander, but if Jim

Bridger did not know how to handle the situation no man in the mountains or in the Missouri Valley did. So he obeyed and Bridger soon had a small blaze burning inside the tent which brightly illuminated the interior. The flap was fastened wide open. Bridger then seated himself near the opening and motioned for Lander to sit by his side.

"Here they come," he warned. "Full of A. F. C. liquor an' natural cussedness. Don't pay any attention to 'em."

With a rush and an inferno of yells the dusky band swept around the tent and howled ferociously. Bridger smoked on placidly and between puffs talked to Lander, who sat with bowed head as if listening intently.

Several bucks ran up and thrust their heads through the opening but neither of the white men seemed to see them. One of the intruders reached in with his knife and slashed it within a few inches of Bridger's head but the veteran gave no heed to the threat. From the corner of his eye Lander beheld a knife-blade slice through the rear of the tent and nudged Bridger.

"Never mind little things like that," drawled Bridger. "They've got quite a few things they'll

try. They don't just dare to kill us, but if they can make us show fight they'll dare anything."

Fascinated and with his heart galloping furiously, Lander watched the knife. Now it was reenforced by other knives and amid horrible yelling the back of the tent was slit to ribbons. Ferocious faces appeared in the openings and fairly spat at them. One man, in a delirium of rage, contented himself with thrusting his body half-way into the tent and stabbing and hacking the ground with his knife, all the time emitting the most devilish shrieks.

"Trying to scare us into stampeding," lazily informed Bridger. "Now sit tight an' don't budge a muscle. They won't shoot at us."

The warning was timely, else Lander would have leaped to his feet to sell his life dearly. Several bucks thrust their guns through the tent and discharged them into the fire, blowing coals and ashes all about.

"That's why, I made a blaze," Bridger cheerfully explained. "If it had been dark they'd 'a' hit us."

As if acting on a prearranged signal the band now rushed close to the front of the tent and *ripped* off a hide in order to expose more fully



"Now sit tight an' don't budge a muscle."

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the prisoners. With knives brandishing and guns pointing they crouched low and howled in the faces of the white men. Never by so much as a quiver of an eyelash did Bridger give evidence of knowing they were there.

Lander, by keeping his gaze lowered while he traced patterns with his finger on the ground, also managed to simulate entire indifference. There came one more volley into the coals of the fire, a final surging forward, a last crescendo of inarticulate cries, then as one the visitors fled back to the river bank and their cache of rum.

"That's over," mused Bridger with a sigh of relief, and now the sweat began dotting his forehead.

"Pawnees tried it on me a few years ago, but they didn't have any rum, just pure ugly, an' they didn't go as far as these fellows did. Fine for the sick man! Reckon I'll slip in an' give him a hot dose."

Not relishing to remain alone, Lander went with him. With coals from their fire they ignited a handful of dry twigs and by the light of these Bridger held up the patient's head and forced him to drink a dish of hot water, re-enforced with medicine from the medicine-case.

The Lance showed no improvement that Lander could detect but Bridger nodded in approval:

"He's quit groaning. Ain't begun to sweat yet but we'll fetch him before morning."

During the night Bridger visited his patient several times to dose him with hot drinks. The Lance continued to rest easy although his skin remained hot and dry.

Near morning Gauche came to the white men's tent badly spent. He said he had been far from the river making medicine.

"I made two medicines," he explained, watching Bridger furtively. "One was for a war-party against the Blackfeet. I know where and when forty lodges with the white man Berger will pass down the river on the way to Fort Union. I shall send a talk to McKenzie to keep inside his fort. We do not want to hurt any of his people by mistake.

"My medicine tells me that if I wait until the Blackfeet have commenced drinking we can kill them all and run off all their horses. Then will the Assiniboins know my medicine is not sick like an old man."

"Your other medicine?" demanded Bridger suspiciously.

"I made that to make the Lance strong again."

"Then that is why my medicine did not cure him last night," sternly cried Bridger. "Burn or throw away that last medicine, or I will let the man die. Take the war-path and get a new name by killing Blackfeet, but stop opening your medicine-bag toward the Lance, or I will tell the Indians of your nation that you killed the Lance."

"My medicine wanted to help," muttered Gauche. "If it will not work with your medicine I will burn it."

He rose and, bending over the fire, secretly opened a skin pouch and reluctantly allowed the contents to drop into the flames. The whites caught the odor of burning feathers. Rising, Gauche asked :

"Now, when will the Water Spirit leave him?"

"Very soon. Some time before the sun goes down," assured Bridger.

CHAPTER XIII

PHINNY COMES AND GOES

THE inactivity was most distressing to Lander. He pictured Papa Clair arriving with the packs. He saw men from the fort discovering them and reporting the news to McKenzie. By this time Lander's friendship for Bridger was so partizan he would feel defeat as keenly as would his patron.

"Why not give that Indian more medicine and have it over with?" he asked of Bridger, who was lounging outside their ruined tent, smoking and watching the Assiniboins recovering from the night's debauch.

"There's one big reason," Bridger simply replied. "I've told Gauche that the Water Spirit would quit the Lance when the keelboat was back at the *chantier*. I've been shaving down on the hot drinks till I could know the bucks have had time to find the boat an' take it up-river. I

want to hold back the cure till the boat's been returned.

"I've got to ding it into Gauche's Injun head that it was my medicine what did the work. If he gits the notion he had a hand in it he might think his medicine was so strong he could hold us for ransom. He's tricky as a snake.

"This waiting business would fret me all up if I let it, but I believe in my luck. This band done its worst when it fooled round our tent last night. They won't try to stop our going less Gauche tells 'em to. They're sick from the rum an' have lost lots of interest in lots of things. Funny that McKenzie's liquor should help us out of this scrape."

One of the leading warriors approached and stared at the ruined tent and said:

"The white men had trouble in the night."

"No trouble," said Bridger. "Some boys made a noise. That is all."

The man retired and passed the word that the white men were very stout of heart. Bridger visited the sick man. The Lance had his eyes open and his gaze was normal. Bridger placed a hand on his head and felt the perspiration starting at the roots of the coarse, thick hair.

The Lance eyed him wonderingly when he lifted him up and gave him a drink of water. To be ministered to by a white man was a new experience.

"Where is the Left Hand?" he faintly asked.

"He makes war-medicine against the Blackfeet."

"He was making medicine against the sickness in me when I went into the black sleep."

"His medicine was weak. He had to have the white man's medicine to make you well. Before sunset my medicine will drive the evil spirit from you if you do as I say."

"It is good."

"You are not to speak nor open your eyes if Gauche enters this tent. When I tell you that you are well, then you can talk."

"It is good."

Bridger returned to Lander and found him trying to make a midday meal out of corn and beans. The mountain man ate heartily of the dried meat. Gauche was busy circulating among his warriors in an effort to arouse their enthusiasm for a raid against the Blackfeet. He kept repeating to them:

"I made medicine against the Blackfeet. I

'dreamed last night and saw much blood on the Blackfeet. There was no blood on the Assiniboins. I saw many signs of Blackfoot horses, and all the trails led to the camp of the Left Hand. Be ready with many arrows and your bows. Let those who have guns save their powder."

It was not until late afternoon that he came to Bridger. There was a peculiar glitter in his wicked little eyes, and for a moment Bridger feared he had found some rum and was commencing a drunk that might lead him into the vilest treachery. It was excitement, however, rather than liquor that had fired the chief.

Before speaking he passed into the sick man's tent and for nearly a minute stared down on the closed eyes of the Lance. So far as appearances went the man might be dead. Coming back to Bridger he said:

"The Lance lies very quiet. I could not see that he breathed. My young men have come back to say the boat is in its place up the river. I have told my warriors to come here and see the white man's medicine drive the Water Spirit from the Lance. I hope the white man's medicine is ready to work. The Lance looks like a dead man."

Bridger put his pipe in the hanger about his neck, stretched his arms and drawled:

"The medicine is ready. But it must hear the young men speak about the boat. It can not hear you say it. Send for them."

As he had expected Gauche acted as his own messenger, there being none of his men at hand. The moment he disappeared Bridger was galvanized into action. He prepared more fever medicine in hot water and took it to the Lance and had him drink it. Then he covered him with extra buffalo-robies. Hurrying back to Lander, who was nervously awaiting the climax, he coolly informed:

"I'll have the taller oozing out of him inside of ten minutes."

"The chief thought he was dead."

"Playing 'possum. See that the rifles are ready. Then try to smoke."

A confusion of voices ran through the tents. Men began to appear in small bands and make for the sick man's tent. Gauche had passed the word that the Lance was dead and that the white men proposed bringing him back to life.

Bridger stood with his back to the excited warriors. One of the headmen started to enter

the tent, but Bridger caught him by the arm and hurled him back. The man's hand went to his ax, but fell limp as Gauche called out: "Be afraid of the man who brings the dead back to life!"

Then the chief harangued his men. He reminded them of how the white man's medicine had discovered the Water Spirit in the Lance, and he repeated Bridger's promise that the sick should be strong once the white medicine heard from the lips of the young men that the boat had been returned to the place-of-building-boats. And for good measure he recalled the numerous instances of Assiniboin braves who had dared set up opposition to their chief, dying of mysterious sicknesses.

There was a deep silence after the speech, finally broken by the appearance of two bucks, who pushed their way through the crowd brusquely. These were the spokesmen, and they had delayed their arrival in order to extract the full dramatic value from the scene. Halting before Bridger, they haughtily announced the completion of their errand.

Bridger turned his head and as if addressing some invisible agency in the tent rapidly repeated their words in English, then paused as if listen-

ing. Drawing himself erect, he loudly called: "The Water Spirit is now leaving the Lance. Stay where you are and watch."

He lifted the flap behind him and entered the oven-like atmosphere and kneeled beside the Lance. The man was panting painfully and in a reeking sweat from the fever medicine and heavy robes. He gasped for water and Bridger allowed him to drink his fill from a kettle.

"You are well," informed Bridger, throwing aside the robes. "Stand up and show the Assiniboins how the white man's medicine works."

Assisted by the mountain man the Lance managed to gain his feet. With a hand under his elbow to steady him he was guided to the opening, Bridger directing in a low voice.

"You will tell them the fires no longer burn inside you. You will tell them you are strong, but very sleepy. Then you will return to your robes and drink some soup and rest for a day. To-morrow you will be strong and go and come a man."

The Lance forgot he was weak and famished. Thoroughly believing a powerful medicine had effected the cure, he felt himself a figure of much importance. His shoulders squared and his eyes

grew steady as he flung back the flap of skin and confronted the mass of warriors. Nor did his voice fail him, but rang out in its usual volume as he proclaimed: "The Lance has been dead. He is alive. He was weak. Now he is strong. There are no fires in his body. The white man's medicine put them out. I go back to eat and sleep. Then I will be ready to take the path again against the enemies of the Assiniboins."

The Indians clapped their hands to their mouths, their gesture to express amazement, as they looked on one who, Gauche had said, was dead. The Lance retreated, and as the flap fell, shutting him in from the view of the warriors, he fell into Bridger's arms. The mountain man placed him on his robes and gave him more water. Opening the top of the tent to create a draft, he drew back the flap over the opening and hurried to his tent.

The Assiniboins eyed him with much awe, their hands clapping to their mouths. Verily his medicine was mighty. If he would come and live with the Assiniboins the nation would drive the Blackfeet beyond the mountains. They had seen him take a man burned and parched like a fragment of sun-scorched hide and overnight turn him out

moist with sweat, ready to eat and sleep, and eager to fight.

Addressing Gauche, who had followed him, and speaking loudly for the benefit of all, Bridger said: "Now we have cured your sick we will go. Last night my medicine told me that you had made a new medicine, one that was very strong and would bring you many horses and Black-foot scalps. Now we want our horses at once."

"If the white men will rest one sleep—" Gauche began.

"Then the Lance would fall sick again. My medicine says it must go," cut in Bridger. "Bring our horses."

Gauche gave an order and the two animals were produced. Taking their rifles, the white men led their horses through the camp, nor did they hear any voice demanding they be held for ransom. Not until they were well beyond the tents did they mount. Bridger rode rapidly for the river and would have turned up-stream had not the sound of music caused him to rein in and stare down the river-road in amazement.

"That ain't no Injun music!" he exclaimed.

"Drums, bells, violin and a clarionet," checked off Lander, his eyes lighting.

"White men from the fort," muttered Bridger, riding toward the music.

Soon they sighted them—a band of white men, mounted and playing their instruments as they rode. The music was most sweet in the ears of the trappers, and for a moment Bridger forgot to wonder at its coming.

"Look who rides behind!" softly cried out Lander.

"I see 'em," murmured Bridger, watching the figures of McKenzie and Phinny. "Remember—not a sign or a word to Phinny that you suspect him," warned Bridger. "The music ain't for us. Must be for the Injuns."

In this surmise he was correct, for on sighting him McKenzie showed surprise, then spurred ahead, and jovially explained:

"A little treat for the Assiniboins. It tickles old Gauche's fancy. We don't lose anything by humoring him. When we get him we get all his people."

"Mighty good notion," admitted Bridger.

Then with a little smile he reminded: "An' the A. F. C. never goes after the Injuns. Just let's 'em come to the fort or stay away."

McKenzie scowled but instantly retorted:

"This display isn't to fetch trade to Fort Union. It's to keep peace. I got word that Gauche plans to attack a party of Blackfeet that's coming in with Jacob Berger. I must stop it. I've worked too hard to get the Blackfeet to come to me to have it spoiled by that old reprobate's actions."

"Why if here isn't Phinny!" exclaimed Bridger as Phinny now rode up. "Howdy, Phinny."

"We meet again, Malcom," called out Lander cordially.

Phinny who had been watching them through half-closed lids, now wreathed his dark face with smiles.

"Lord, Lander! But wasn't I glad when Black Arrow's band arrived at the Crow village and said you had escaped from the Blackfeet and was on your way to Fort Union. I'm awfully glad to see you.

"And, Mr. Bridger, no hard feelings I hope because I've hired Ferguson to work for us with the Crows. He wanted the place. He felt it was more steady than working for a company that goes after beaver only."

"That's all right," assured Bridger. "I've got plenty of men who'll go and make opposition to him. The Crows think a heap of me. Don't

make much difference what man I send there. I let Ferguson have it as he was begging for a job. But as you say H. B. men are better fitted for the A. F. C. post-trade than for going after beaver for my company."

McKenzie ordered the musicians to go on to the camp and hold the Indians from filling the river-trail. Then he anxiously asked:

"What became of you two? You started to get the boat yesterday morning. We've been worried about you."

"The Deschamps gang and some of the Rems corralled us yesterday morning and held us for ransom. Old woman decoyed us to their cabin by saying one of the men was sick an' needed help. They're a bad mess."

McKenzie cursed in genuine rage.

"They've got to be wiped out," he fiercely declared. "I've stood lots from the Deschamps and Rem families. I've winked at quite a few things as they were handy as interpreters. But I'm through. I'm sorry Gardepied didn't make good his threat and kill old Deschamps. My men at the fort won't stand any more nonsense from that crowd. Where are you going now?"

"We stopped here last night to cure La Lance

of a fever. We're now going up to select the boat you said you'd sell us."

"I see," mused McKenzie, his eyes twinkling.

And Phinny stared at the river as if greatly interested in its muddy current.

"I did agree to sell you the best boat at the *chantier*, didn't I?" McKenzie continued. "Well, I'll keep my word, although it may cramp my plans. Hard to choose between friendship and business, Mr. Bridger. Lucky I didn't promise some of those down the river. Since you went away I'm called on to use all I have."

"I don't want to hold you to a promise that really fusses you," gravely said Bridger. "If you want to be let off——"

"No, no," hastily broke in McKenzie. "No one shall say Kenneth McKenzie went back on his word. I told you you could buy any boat up there. I'll even go with you. Some of my men might be there and not understand. They'd forbid your taking it. One boat was the bargain.

"Phinny, ride after the men and see that they start for the fort after they've tickled up the chief. Tell that old villain to take his men and camp nearer the fort and that I'll fire the cannon as a salute to his greatness. The scoundrel! If I

can get him into the fort and drunk I'll stand some show of getting word to Berger to hold the Blackfeet away until I can send men to make the trade."

Lander did not dare glance at Bridger for fear McKenzie would read the question burning in his eyes. Had Phinny learned about the packs? Was McKenzie's great need of boats due in part to their getting hold of the forty packs? Bridger was putting the same queries to himself, although his eyes revealed nothing.

"It's mighty good of you to go with us," declared Bridger. "Only wish Phinny could come along."

Phinny flashed his teeth in a smile, darted a glance at his chief and regretted:

"Business comes first. See you soon at the fort. I've got lots of St. Louis news to talk over with you, Lander. Express brought up some letters while I was at the Crow village."

There was a taunt in this although Phinny's demeanor seemed to breathe good fellowship only. Lander forced a smile and nodded. Bridger understood his young friend's feelings and, as if it were an afterthought, called to Phinny: "I forgot to warn you, young man, that

old Deschamps seems to think you're tied up to that wildcat girl of his. Look out for a knife when you meet 'em."

The smile left Phinny's face. "Hang Deschamps!" he muttered.

"With all my heart," agreed Bridger.

In putting the man on his guard Bridger had punished him for plotting misery against Lander. It was simple enough to imagine the nature of the St. Louis gossip Phinny was to retail. Included in it would be the favoritism of Hurry-Up Parker for him, and the intimation that he was to marry Miss Susette.

The moment he had spoken, however, Bridger knew he had scored a second point. Phinny would keep clear of the breeds. If he did not already know about the beaver packs it was a most excellent move to discourage his intimacy with the Deschamps. The breed, having failed to secure the packs for himself, would be inclined to sell his secret to Phinny or McKenzie.

Even now Papa Clair might be coming down the Yellowstone. Could Phinny and the mixed-bloods be kept apart for a few days—so much the better for the Rocky Mountain Fur Company's chances. Always provided, of course, that Phinny,

had not learned the truth while at the Crow village.

McKenzie was most affable as the three of them galloped up the trail to the *chantier*. He talked on a wide range of subjects, but always edged back to Bridger's intended use of the keelboat. The mountain man stuck to his original explanation of wishing to have an extra boat at Fort Pierre. Evidently this did not satisfy McKenzie. While a most businesslike arrangement, it did not account for Bridger's haste in securing the boat. It would have been more natural for Prevost to send word down to St. Louis for another boat to be towed up by the packet.

But here was Bridger making a long journey from the Sweetwater to the Missouri for the sole purpose ostensibly of buying a keelboat. McKenzie refused to swallow it. On the other hand, although he cudgeled his brain, he could not see what use Bridger would have for the boat above Fort Pierre.

Had he brought pack-animals the answer would have been simple. But Phinny—only Bridger could not be sure of this yet—had heard nothing while among the Crows which would tend to solve the problem.

In fact he had been amazed on reaching the fort to learn the two men were there ahead of him. Bridger was shrewd enough to detect the suspicions revolving back of McKenzie's sharp eyes, and he was pleased to believe his secret was not known.

"The boat-yard is right ahead," said McKenzie as they came in view of cleared ground along the river bank.

He pulled his horse 'down to a walk and smiled in a peculiar fashion at the mountain man. Bridger winked gravely at Lander, who was seized with a desire to laugh. McKenzie continued: "I'm sorry I made that promise, but I always keep my word. Look them over and take your pick. You must be satisfied with what is here, as even hospitality and my warm desire to please will not permit me to go an inch farther in the matter. Loyalty to my employers draws the line rather than my natural inclination."

This well-rounded sentiment was given with much unction and McKenzie's long upper lip was drawn down in sanctimonious regret that it must be so.

A fringe of willows concealed the river-shore until 'one had entered the clearing. Leaving

McKenzie and Lander, Bridger eagerly pressed ahead and leaped from his horse.

"I had no business to allow my admiration for Mr. Bridger to wring any promise from me," McKenzie said to Lander. "But he has a way of getting what he wants. Phinny tells me you were employed in the A. F. C. store in St. Louis. You should have remained. Your merit would have been rewarded."

"I was pitched out, neck and crop," Lander informed him.

"So, so? But there is a chance of your returning—yes, I believe I am warranted in saying it, even if it would sound better coming from one of my superiors, either Mr. Pierre Chouteau, or some of the others; I have some influence in the St. Louis office.

"Or if you wish you can stay on here with me. A clerk, say, at three hundred, to stay three years. Next year I could give you a hundred more. Another hundred the third year. We want young men who work with the idea of becoming partners in the company, who feel they are a part of the organization."

"I'm following Mr. Bridger now," said Lander. "If he joins the A. F. C. I should be pleased

to come in with him. He's been mighty good to me."

"Well, well. Every man must decide on which side his bread is buttered. Mr. Bridger seems perplexed over the boats."

"He's probably trying to make a choice," Lander innocently suggested, his lips twitching.

"I hope he is not disappointed," mused McKenzie, his face gravely sympathetic.

To relieve his fears Bridger called: "All right, Mr. McKenzie. I'll take this one. Fact, there ain't only one choice. T'other one seems to be bu'sted."

"The other one—" began McKenzie. "To be sure; the other one is damaged. I had forgotten that. And you find one that—that suits?"

"It's all right," cheerily cried Bridger. "Come down and look it over. I can't see anything wrong 'bout it."

Much puzzled and deeply disturbed at the unexpected presence of two boats, McKenzie cantered into the clearing and rode his horse down to the shelving bank. To his dismay he beheld one of his best keelboats. It was one of the two he had ordered his men surreptitiously to remove. But here it was—fast beside the broken boat.

"Yes, it seems to be all right," he mumbled, mopping his forehead with a gay silk handkerchief. "Seems to be all right."

And in his heart he cursed the blunderers. "I'll send some of my men up to fetch it down for you," he added.

"I'd never forgive myself if I took any more advantage of your neighborly kindness," earnestly declared Bridger. "Lander 'n' me will work it down. I'll give you the order at the fort."

"Come, come, Mr. Bridger. Never do work you don't need to. It's a bad example for the *engagés* and Indians," McKenzie protested with some asperity. "And you have your horses to take care of."

"Here comes one of your musicians, riding like the thunder!" exclaimed Lander, recognizing the drummer.

The horseman came up at a gallop, and, yanking his blown mount to its haunches, excitedly cried out: "Th' Deschamps gang has murdered Mr. Phinny. One of Gauche's men found him stabbed to death half a mile from th' Assiniboin camp. Th' Injun read th' trail an' says he found tracks of a Injun woman's moccasins."

While McKenzie remained speechless with

horror at the news Bridger yelled out: "What sort of a knife was used?"

"Dirk."

"Then th' squaw done it—old Deschamps' wildcat girl. She tried to stick a dirk into me. The old man said Phinny had promised to keep her as his woman. She probably thought he was going back on his bargain."

"This is terrible!" groaned McKenzie. "I must ride back at once."

As he reined his horse into the trail Bridger ran up to the messenger and said:

"Your nag's blowed. Ride one of our horses to the fort, leadin' t'other two."

"Yes, bring the animals along," wearily mumbled McKenzie as he rode down the trail.

Bridger piled into the keelboat and beckoned Lander to follow him. Then he warned:

"Now, young feller, you're going to see some real boating. It's twenty-five miles, an' keelboats ain't s'posed to run at night except when there's a good moon. But we're going through—bent for breakfast. It'll be darker'n the inside of a beaver. We're going to pass the fort in the dark an' make the Yallerstone without being spotted. Now grab one of them poles an' hump yourself."

CHAPTER XIV.

BEAVER! BEAVER!

THE boat was fifty feet long and twelve feet wide, an awkward craft for two men to navigate even in daylight. With night blotting out the banks and concealing snags and bars it seemed to Lander to be an impossible task. Yet by the time McKenzie was galloping down the river-road to investigate the murder of Phinny the mountain man and his younger assistant had pushed the boat into mid-stream. Motioning Lander to take a position on the starboard runway—*passe avant*—of cleats, Bridger gave him a long, knobbed pole, and standing opposite him commanded in mimicry of Etienne Prevost:

"A bas les perches!"

Down went the poles and the two men began pushing the boat from under their feet; Bridger holding his efforts down to a level with those of his inexperienced companion. So long as they

exerted an identical pressure the boat held a true course. With experienced river men at the poles there was no need of a man at the tiller. Strive as he would, however, the mountain man outpushed his employee, and the first time down the *passee avant* he was compelled to seize the long tiller to avoid running ashore.

"Three hours of some sort of light," he mused as they straightened out once more. "We ought to make the bulk of the distance in that time, barring accidents. I don't want to reach the fort till it's good and dark. Now let's see if I can't keep even with you."

A little practise on the part of both, one striving to increase his motive power, the other holding himself in check, soon enabled them to keep to mid-channel. Time was lost at the bends as Bridger was compelled to take the tiller and leave the current to do the work.

Twice they ran on to bars, but as the boat was empty they were soon afloat. Almost all the snags were well inshore on either hand—carried and hung up there by high water. As the night shut in and the banks became blurred it was difficult to determine where the shadows ended and the willow and cottonwood growths began.

"It's mostly luck from now on," murmured Bridger as the outstretched claw of a snag rasped against the boat. "You keep in the bow to push us off. We'll let the current do the work."

The hour was now close to midnight and they would be passing the fort very soon.

Lander completely lost all sense of direction. He was adrift on a limitless sea. There was no longer any such things as shores. Only the subdued call of a voice on the left bank dispelled this illusion of infinite space.

Bridger at the tiller softly signaled for him to remain quiet. Lander crawled back and found his patron lying on top of the cargo-box.

"See or hear anything?" came the voice, sounding very close.

"Too foggy. They must have hung up till mornin'. Ye done gone an' let th' fire go out. Yer fire, much as it is mine. Stop yappin' an' help git it started ag'in."

Bridger chuckled and whispered.

"McKenzie has men out to watch for us. He's thought up some game to take the boat back. That dark smooch up there is Union."

Lander rubbed his eyes but was unable to locate the "smooch." No lights were burning

in or near the fort, and only a mountain man's vision could make out the parallelogram of stockade and buildings.

"Then we've got by," Lander exulted under his breath.

"By the fort," dryly agreed Bridger, "but we ain't by Kenneth McKenzie yet. We've got to round the Point before we can hit the Yallerstone. We'll be there mighty soon now. That's the danger place."

The Point was the narrow and thumb-shaped stretch of land formed by the river's eccentric course in running south to receive the Yellowstone and then doubling back to the north and east. As they neared the Point the channel narrowed; and, as Bridger had expected, guards were stationed there. Obviously McKenzie was determined to get the boat back.

"Git a light," growled a voice. "Why'n sin don't ye git that fire started?"

"Wal, gimme time," was the snarling rejoinder.

Bridger closed a hand on Lander's wrist and softly whispered:

"We must git by before they start their fire."

The boat glided on. The men on the bank

seemed to be within jumping distance. One of them tested his memory by repeating:

“ ‘Mr. McKenzie’s mighty sorry but he must have th’ boat to take Mr. Phinny’s dead body down-river.’ ”

“ ‘All t’other boats bein’ needed for comp’ny work!’ ” sullenly completed the second voice.

“Then we’re to say that if he ain’t in too much of a hurry he can have a boat arter th’ rush is over. Mebbe in a week or ten days. I reckon I can tote that talk to th’ Three Forks o’ th’ Missouri an’ fetch it back an’ never lose a word.”

“Shet yer trap an’ open yer peepers. We’ll soon be able to see things.”

This as a tiny spiral of flame ran up a mass of sun-dried débris.

Lander held his breath. He could make out the forms of two men armed with rifles, as they passed between him and the growing fire. The blaze as yet was scarcely under way. Bridger sighed in deep content and murmured:

“They’ll be looking up-stream. By the time the fire gits to burning at a good lick they can look up or down an’ be cussed, so far as we care. ’Nother three minutes an’ we’ll be nosing into the Yallerstone.”

As if suddenly desirous of serving Kenneth McKenzie the fire flared up and burned a broad patch across the river. Lander believed they would be discovered and crouched low to escape a bullet. But although the radius of the light zone rapidly increased it did not catch up with the receding boat; and then again the watchers were staring up-stream. The keelboat was again in darkness although the fire was visible—a red hole through a black blanket.

“We must do some poling,” said Bridger. “Here’s the Yallerstone.”

“Where?” blankly asked Lander, unable to see anything once he removed his gaze from the fire.

“Can’t you feel the current pushing us to the left? Work gently. Sound carries like sin on the water.”

Lander worked with great caution, but with no intelligence. He did what his patron commanded, but he did it blindly. If not for occasional backward glances at the fire he would have believed the boat was going about in circles. Then something snatched the fire from sight, and Bridger was announcing:

“We’ve done it. We’re in the Yallerstone now. Timber on this south bank hides the fire from

us. A little ahead is a bend. 'After we make that we'll hide up an' camp, an', as Etienne says, '*fumer la pipe.*'"

Now the work was more strenuous as they were fighting against the current. Again the task became purposeless so far as Lander could observe. It consisted of nosing ashore and backing out, of blundering on to bars and snags and working clear. At last he was driven to ask:

"Do you know where you want to go and how near you are to arriving, Mr. Bridger?"

"We're already there," assured Bridger. "Work her dead ahead."

Lander stood in the stern, pushing with all his strength. He heard the rustling of branches in the bow and finally felt a limb worrying his head.

"Now it's *fumer la pipe*," said Bridger.

Lander reached out with his pole and found it rested on the river bank.

"I reckon I could jump ashore," he said.

"Reckon so, if you didn't fall in. Better stretch out on the cargo-box an' git a few feet of sleep."

Both were asleep when the sun came up, but were soon awake and on the bank. The river was empty. They were above the bend and snugly

concealed under a rank spread of willow boughs. For a considerable distance the course of the river could be traced due south, and nowhere along its lonely reaches was there any sign of the bull-boats. Lander grew worried. Bridger was grave but lost none of his composure. He dozed, stood watch, and ate dried meat and never betrayed any impatience. Yet when in the early afternoon he detected a moving dot far up the river his gray eyes flashed and he put up his pipe.

"Some Indians from the Crow village coming to visit Fort Union," suggested Lander in a low whisper, as if the newcomer were well within hearing.

"White man," muttered Bridger. "Tell by the way he paddles. Not very good at the paddle, but must have been some time. Probably he's old an' has been away from it."

"Papa Clair?" exclaimed Lander, unable to make out anything except a tiny shape moving toward them with the current.

Bridger made no reply for half a minute, then slowly informed the other:

"Yes, it's Clair. He's taking it easy, thank the lord! Packs must be safe, or he wouldn't be so perky an' yet so delib'rate."

Fascinated, Lander waited and the dot became a canoe; then almost before he knew it the canoe leaped from the middle distance into the foreground, and there was Papa Clair, white hair and white mustaches and his knife in his belt.

"Good day, Papa Clair," softly called out Bridger from behind the willow screen.

"*Bonjour, m'sieu,*" quietly returned Papa Clair, sending his canoe toward the hiding-place and picking up a rifle.

"Bound to have a fight with me," saluted Bridger, poking his head into view. "Where are the bull-boats hid up?"

"*M'sieu* Bridger! It is good to see you. Where is my young friend? Ah—now I see you, my friend. Then all is well with you. But name of a pipe! Such a bother, the boats of the bull! They are safe. Let that be your satisfy. But when we have done with them I will rip them to the devil for being blind pigs and the sons of pigs."

He passed under the drooping branches and held his canoe against the boat and exchanged handshakes. His trip down the Big Horn and Yellowstone with the packs had been uneventful except for the vicissitudes of snags and bars and

the awkwardness of his craft. He had passed the Crow village in the night and seen no Indians.

Five trappers had accompanied him. They had arrived and gone into hiding early in the morning of this very day. Bridger in turn gave a synopsis of his and Lander's adventures, and rapidly explained the necessity of shifting the cargo and making down the Missouri that night.

"We must be well down-stream by to-morrow morning," he concluded. "We will stay here till dusk, then pole up to the packs. You go back an' fetch a couple men to help pole. It must be done in a rush. An' fetch along some grub. Lander seems to have a delicate stomach."

"I go. The men are impatient to hunt along the shore. One of them swore he would go and I had to show him my pet knife to hold his interests to our little camp. God is good!"

With another handshake, especially warm to Lander, he pushed from under the willows and paddled up-stream. Bridger yawned and went to sleep. Lander kept awake, nervously anticipating the night's work and feverishly crossing many bridges of risks and disappointments.

Success meant seeing Susette. He pictured Kenneth McKenzie as the great obstacle between

him and the home-going. He could not imagine that gentleman remaining inactive. The failure of the keelboat to arrive at the fort was sure to cause all sorts of suspicions. The Indians would be sent to scout the country for it.

The conversation of the men on guard at the Point revealed that McKenzie was determined to take the boat back and would urge an absurd excuse in order to succeed. The distance between Lander and the girl in St. Louis lengthened and stretched out during the afternoon until it seemed as if the whole world were between them.

Lander succeeded in dozing off only to be aroused by the arrival of Papa Clair and two trappers. They brought a huge piece of cooked cow-meat and a bag of salt. Bridger joined Lander in a ravenous attack on the food. As they ate Papa Clair signaled for silence. He pointed down-stream, and Bridger crept to his side and beheld a canoe following the opposite bank. In it were two men, one white, the other an Indian.

"McKenzie's clerk an' a Assiniboin," muttered Bridger. "Sent to search the river, but they seem to be half-hearted."

"Behold! They grow weary, they turn back!"

"Saves us catching an' holding 'em till we can

git away," said Bridger. "After they make the bend we'll start for the bull-boats. No more scouts will come up here now; they're going back to report."

The canoe dropped down-stream and quickly disappeared around the bend. After waiting ten or fifteen minutes Papa Clair's canoe was fastened to the keelboat and the men quickly poled it up-stream and into an eddy.

Bridger held council and selected two to make the trip as far as Fort Pierre. The others were directed to return to the Greene as soon as they had worked the keelboat out of the Yellowstone and into the Missouri.

"I'm going back to the fort to give a' order for the boat an' sell the two horses," he explained. "Papa Clair will be boss here. When it gits dark you'll run down into the Missouri for 'bout a mile an' a half where the big island is. Lay up there till I come. I'm going there now in the canoe, an' I shall hide the canoe on the bank. Papa Clair, if I'm not there by midnight you're to strike for Pierre, keeping all the men with you."

With a nod to Lander he stepped into the canoe and with sturdy strokes sped down the river. Striking into the Missouri, he crossed to the north

shore and held on until he came to the island, abreast of which Fort William was to stand two years later in brief opposition to Fort Union.

The channel between the island and the river bank was narrow, and a few strokes of the paddle sent the canoe ashore. Fort Union was a little less than three miles away. Striking north, Bridger made a wide *détour* until he was above the fort and on the river.

It was now at the edge of dusk, and he knew the keelboat would be descending the Yellowstone within an hour. He hoped his presence at the fort would concentrate and hold McKenzie's attention to him and that the search for the keelboat would slow up. Almost as soon as he came up the bank from the river and entered the river-road he was quickly spied by one of the clerks. The young man was astonished at seeing him, and gasped: "Mr. Bridger! Why, we've been— Why, Mr. Bridger! That is, Mr. McKenzie was hoping you'd show up. Where's the boat?"

"Ashore," sternly replied Bridger. "I've come afoot to see your boss."

He walked on, exhibiting no desire for the clerk's company; and the latter, glad to be free, ran ahead to give the news to his irate employer.

When Bridger passed through the gate he walked with a slight limp, as if lame from travel.

McKenzie, on the southwest bastion balcony, saw him approaching and hastened out to greet him. His shrewd gaze took account of the limp and the downcast expression on Bridger's face.

"The boat got ashore, the clerk tells me," said McKenzie in a soothing voice. "Too bad. Too bad. I wanted you to let my men fetch it down, you know. Too much for two men to do alone and in the night. Must have grounded quite a ways up-stream."

He frowned slightly, unable to understand how his men had failed to find the boat after scouring both sides of the river almost to the boat-yard.

"You couldn't have more'n got started."

"Quite a ways," sighed Bridger, lifting a leg and tenderly feeling his ankle. "But I'm here to give you an order on the Rocky Mountain Fur Company for the boat an' to sell you the two horses."

"Come inside," invited McKenzie, turning to the bastion. "I want to talk with you. Do you mind coming up to the balcony? I've been watching for Jacob Berger. He and the Blackfeet should be getting along before now. I'm afraid

of old Gauche. He wouldn't move his camp down here. Promised he would, but he hasn't showed up. I promised him twenty new guns and ten kegs of liquor if he wouldn't have any trouble with the Blackfeet until after they'd fetched me their trade. Slippery old rascal!

"But about the boat. I hate like the devil to back out of a bargain, but I need that boat to take Malcom Phinny's body down-river. He stands high in St. Louis with the A. F. C. and with the people of the city——"

"Bah!" broke in Bridger in huge disgust. "You just stick that young devil up in a tree to dry same's you would a' Injun an' send his carcass down-river when your steamer comes along. He betrayed my man Lander into the hands of the Blackfeet; he killed my man Porker. He an' old Deschamps planned to murder Lander the minute they l'arned he was at the rendezvous."

"I don't believe it!"

"Careful, Mr. McKenzie. Me, Jim Bridger, says it. An' I don't accuse any man till I know. Phinny was worse'n a' Injun. The A. F. C. don't owe him any partic'lar attention."

"It's hard for me to believe it," corrected McKenzie, his face flushing. In truth he never had

had the slightest suspicion that Phinny was carrying on any campaign of hate against Lander.

"Of course it's hard for you to believe it until I say it's a fact, but it's true. Even if he didn't take naturally to murdering, why such a hurry to git his dead body down-river when you've already told headquarters the steamboat will let you keep live men up here an' pay 'em off in goods at the reg'lar Injun-trade profit?

"Mr. McKenzie, I'm keeping the boat. The bargain's made an' you'll stick to it."

"I'll stick to it when I know what you want that boat for," retorted McKenzie. "I'm something more than a trader up here. I'm called the King of the Missouri, perhaps you'll remember. I'm not only responsible to the A. F. C. for what goes on up here, but I'm also responsible to the United States government."

"Was you responsible to the United States government when you set up your distillery?" asked Bridger with a grin.

"That was to conduct scientific experiments with our natural fruits and berries," McKenzie haughtily replied. "The government is perfectly satisfied, and that matter is ended."

"An' the still is bu'sted up," added Bridger.

"Why, every one knows how Pierre Chouteau, Jr., worked his head off in getting Senator Benton to fix it so the A. F. C. wouldn't lose its license. It took every ounce of power an' influence Old Bullion had at that to straighten it out.

"Now you've 'lowed by your words that I'm doing something I hadn't oughter. I'm waiting for you to take them words back."

McKenzie bit his lips, then smiled graciously and declared: "Jim Bridger, I never accused you of any wrong-doing. You're going to be one of us some time. But as King of the Missouri I must keep an eye on things."

"A King of the Missouri. I'm a King of the Missouri too," said Bridger. "So is Jim Baker an' Etienne Prevost an' Papa Clair an' a whole herd of others. Now we'll make out an order for that boat an' I'll sell you the two horses."

"I refuse to sell the boat," stiffly decided McKenzie. "Whenever I find it I shall seize it; and I do not care to buy your horses."

"I don't give a hang 'bout the horses; but the boat's mine. If you won't take an order on the Rocky Mountain Fur Company then I'll credit it against what the A. F. C. owes me for the robes I traded to Phinny. I'll trade my horses to old

Gauche. He thinks I'm prime medicine. Reckon I'll put a winter man with him. He'd do well."

"If you'll agree not to put a winter man in with Gauche you can have the boat for four hundred dollars and I'll take the horses," growled McKenzie.

"You ain't losing a penny on that boat," solemnly declared Bridger. "Boat prices have gone up mighty smart. So's the price on horses. We'll call the horses two hundred apiece. That squares off the boat an' saves bookkeeping. Got Deschamps yet?"

"No. My men are after Deschamps now. If they'd been at hand you might have decided you didn't want the boat. If Gardepied is with the Blackfeet I'll send him after Deschamps."

"Here comes some one in a hurry. Probably bringing word that they've found Deschamps," said Bridger, pointing to a man riding furiously toward the stockade gate from the river-road.

McKenzie quit the balcony and ran down the stairs with Bridger close behind him. The newcomer rode into the stockade as McKenzie ran from the bastion. One glance and Bridger dodged behind a group of clerks and edged toward the gate.

"Kenneth McKenzie!" cried the horseman, leaping from his animal and glaring wildly about.

"Yes, yes, Berger! Here I am. Mr. Bridger and I were on the balcony and saw you coming."

"Bridger?" gasped Berger. "So he knew enough to fetch the forty packs of beaver he got from the Blackfeet to you 'stead of tryin' to git 'em down to St. Louis. It's a fine trade even if ye do have to give some presents to the Blackfeet—to them what's left, anyway."

"Forty packs of beaver! ——! That's the answer to the keelboat!" yelled McKenzie. "Where's Bridger? He was here a second ago. Find him, you idiots! Don't let him get away in that A. F. C. keelboat!"

But by this time Bridger was through the gate and running along the western stockade to make the woods at the north.

"Forty packs of beaver, and the A. F. C. kindly letting him have a boat to take them down-river!" moaned McKenzie.

"There's something else to worry 'bout, Mr. McKenzie," panted Berger, staggering to him and clutching his arm. "I'm wounded an' can't talk a whale of a lot. That cussed old p'isoner of a Gauche had his men fire into th' Blackfoot

lodges two hours ago. Killed a heap of warriors an' got away with three hundred ponies. It ain't no time to talk 'bout Bridger's beaver packs unless ye want'er lose th' Blackfoot trade."

While McKenzie was confronting this new problem Bridger was making the best of the dusk and the confusion in the fort to reach a point where it would be safe to turn his course toward the island. He assumed that all the hubbub inside the stockade had resulted from McKenzie's discovery of his plans. So he spared himself none in racing to the concealed canoe. He believed the search for him would be up the river, as he had arrived from that direction.

An hour later he was hiding on the up-stream tip of the island and answering a low signal out on the water. Ten minutes passed and Papa Clair was softly announcing: "We arrive, *M'sieu* Bridger. Holy blue, but your medicine was strong to let you go to the fort and return."

"All the men except two take this canoe an' hustle back up the Yallerstone," cried Bridger. "Berger's come with his Blackfeet an' they may strike for home through the Crow country, an' it's best for you men to have a big start of 'em. An' keep humping. Now we'll travel."

CHAPTER XV

SUSETTE IN THE GARDEN

IT WAS Lander's second visit to the American Fur Company's office within two hours. He had arrived that morning and had lost no time in presenting the order, only to find Parker was not down yet. He walked to the levee and watched Etienne Prevost superintend the removal of the beaver packs to the Washington Avenue store.

"Mr. Parker isn't here, and won't be here to-day," the clerk informed him on this second call. "He's sick. Say, Mr. Lander, the whole town's talking about your beaver. Prevost said you was to get ten thousand for yourself. Mr. Bridger must be a mighty nice feller to work for."

"He's the best there ever was," fervently declared Lander, thrilled to have even a clerk "mister" him.

Incidentally the town's gossip about his ten-thousand-dollar bonus was correct, although

Bridger could have claimed all for the Rocky Mountain Fur Company after paying the Hudson Bay Company its ten per cent., or four thousand dollars.

"He told me back in the mountains he would do right by me. He's done better than that. After saving me from Indian torture he didn't need to make me any present. If Mr. Bridger wants me to skin a skunk I'm ready for the job. I'll call to-morrow about the order——"

"Hold on!" cried the clerk, grinning sheepishly. "I got excited over your good luck—just a plain fool, I am. I sent a boy to Mr. Parker after your first visit. He sent back word for you to bring the order to him. If it's all right he'll O. K. it and you can put it in the bank."

"Why didn't you say so?" snapped Lander, darting from the office and hurrying to the Pine Street house.

His heart threatened to choke him as he entered the yard and mounted the porch and rang. His eyes were blurred and he felt faint as the door slowly opened. He expected to behold Susette. Instead it was a maid.

Without a word she motioned him to enter and go into a room off the hall. Again his heart

played him tricks, but on entering the room he found only Parker. He was reclining in a chair and was scowling villainously.

"Show me that order," Parker growled. "Don't stand there like an idiot. Have you an order on the A. F. C., or haven't you?"

Without a word Lander presented it. Parker frowned over it, grunted several times, then endorsed it and handed it back and demanded:

"Why didn't you bring it here at once when you heard I was laid up? Loafing round town and enjoying your reputation for being a mountain man, eh? Pushing your smug face round for people to admire while your boss' business was sliding to the dogs."

"You forget I wasn't to come here till I was asked," Lander answered, his face dismal with disappointment. All the down-river day-dreams were dead. His medicine was weak and foolish.

"What about your getting a big batch of beaver?" sneered Parker.

"Jim Bridger pulled me and forty packs out of a Blackfoot camp. I take no credit for that," he wearily replied.

Then with a sudden flash of spirit:

"But I did help Mr. Bridger bring them from

Fort Union in a keelboat we got from Mr. McKenzie. I am a little bit proud of that. Your whole Upper Missouri outfit tried to stop us and couldn't. Now I'll be going along."

"Stop, you idiot!" thundered Parker, and Lander wheeled expecting to be attacked. "You and your twopenny reputation! Want to get back down-town and have folks point you out, eh? You a mountain man! Why, you young pup—"

"That's enough," choked Lander. "I may never be a mountain man, but I'm done standing your abuse, sir."

"Then what'n the devil you hanging round here for? Huh? Eh? Get out, you impudent cub. Hi! Not that way. Out the back way, same's the servants do."

Pale with passion, yet compelling himself to remember it was a sick man and Susette's father, Lander persisted in making for the front door. Again Parker's voice called profanely after him and added:

"The other way! She's in the garden."

An hour passed before they began their return to earth.

"Your father was so queer. I don't under-

stand it," said Lander. "I'm sure he sent me here. He said you were here. But he talked to me something— Well, never mind."

"I've been rather disagreeable to father since you went away," she cooed, snuggling closer. "I wouldn't eat anything—when he was around. Then that funny Etienne Prevost was up here this morning and talked with him. Their swearing was something terrible at first.

"Then father calmed down and let Prevost deliver a message Mr. Bridger sent by him. The message was all about you, and father must have listened with both ears. He thinks Mr. Bridger is awfully smart:

"But they were such horrible things about you I couldn't believe a word, of course. Killing people with knives! As if my darling would ever do that! But it was just the kind of stuff to please father. My maid listened at the keyhole like a little cat, and came and told me. Probably she made most of it up. But such awful stories, dearest! Still they pleased father, for I heard him chuckling after Mr. Prevost had gone.

"When he saw you coming he told me to come out here. I told him I was his daughter but that I must and would see you, and he said it would

look better if you did the chasing. He hurt my pride terribly. But I knew he would send you to me and I felt better. And you are really and truly my King of the Missouri!"

"No, no," cried Lander. "I'm hardly fit to rank as a common soldier of the Missouri."

"A Prince of the Missouri, anyway—I'm partial to princes. And I like the way you wear your hair over your shoulders. Naughty! Hold still. It's my ribbon, you know. A prince should feel very proud to wear his lady's ribbon. Now you must come and let father see you in the new ribbon.... Now I know you don't love me!"

THE END

